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G. K. CHESTERTON AS LITERARY CRITIC

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INTRODUCTION

Chesterton is not primarily a literary critic. His main interests are religion, philosophy, politics and economics. Although his production was voluminous, one dominating idea does emerge from the bewildering variety of his works: he was orthodox in religion, radical in politics. He defended traditional Christianity; and he attacked all tyranny in political and economic systems.

Most of the works about Chesterton are not chiefly concerned with him in his function as literary critic. They mention, in passing, this department of his activity. Cecil Chesterton, in G. K. Chesterton, a Criticism, calls attention to the fact that his brother undertakes literary criticism in the spirit of the "crusader," the "swashbuckler."¹ Hilaire Belloc's brief eulogy, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters, calls attention to Chesterton's power of "summing up any one pen...in exact sentences; sometimes in a single sentence."² Maurice Evans in his LeBas Prize Essay, G. K. Chesterton, does not devote a separate chapter to the literary criticism, since he feels that Chesterton approaches it from "a doctrinal point of view."³

1 Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton, a Criticism, p. 93.

2 Hilaire Belloc, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters, p. 53.

3 Maurice Evans, G. K. Chesterton, p. ix.

Gerald Bullett, The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton, takes a similar stand.¹

Sister Mary Paul Fisch has written a Master's Thesis on G. K. Chesterton as Literary Critic. This work emphasizes the wide scope and variety of Chesterton's comments on literary men. It is not derogatory to assert that it does not discover the principles which guided Chesterton in his estimates. The writer does not make the discovery of such principles her goal. The same comment holds true for Bogaerts' Chesterton and the Victorian Age.

I began my research into Chesterton's literary criticism with the purpose of discovering principles which guided him in his evaluations of literary men and their works. It was my further purpose to observe, record and comment on the practical literary criticism which he had erected on the foundations of those principles. This remains my purpose in the dissertation which follows.

In trying to achieve this purpose, I soon discovered that by confining myself solely to a study of his literary criticism, I would be unable to reach my goal. I was unable to find within his practical literary criticism any clear enunciation of standards of literary value. Furthermore he had not written any work devoted to a discussion of

¹ Gerald Bullett, The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton, p. 195.

critical theory.

I was aware all this time that Chesterton was a voluminous writer. I concluded, or at least hoped, that some kind of key to his literary criticism would be found in the mass of his other writings. I studied these more than ninety volumes and in addition his contributions to periodicals, particularly The Illustrated London News. I read about the evils of prohibition, female suffrage, Eastern religions. I learned why cocoa is repulsive, why ale is good, why wine is even better. I point to these as an infinitesimal fraction of the total variety of subject matter that concerned him.

As I read I discovered that certain points of view kept reappearing in all his writing. I discovered, for example, that Chesterton finds a certain child-like innocence, simplicity, spirit of expectation, to be a desirable attitude toward life. The discovery of his belief in the desirability of this child-like attitude led me to conclude that it might be possible to discover other attitudes that guided him. I was able to unearth others. I also found that a knowledge of these attitudes clarified the position of a man whose approach struck many of his contemporaries as very puzzling.

I found that the book, Orthodoxy, was an important aid to an investigator attempting to discover clear principles

emerging out of apparently disorderly brilliance. As I became aware that Chesterton's thought could be systematized into something like a philosophy, and as I received help from Chesterton's own Orthodoxy, I was also conscious of the fact that I had to find some connection between his philosophy and his literary criticism.

The discovery of the philosophy and the discovery of its relationship to his literary criticism proceeded concurrently. I found that Chesterton made much of the sense of wonder. I also observed Chesterton's contention that knowledge of the significance of the sense of wonder contributed to an understanding of Browning's poetry. I observed Chesterton's insistence that the impressionistic breaking down of the firm line is a dangerous tendency in art and thought. I noted his preference for dogma and sharp definitions. I also became aware how heavily Chesterton leaned on this principle of firmness of outline and sharpness of definition when he interpreted the contributions of Blake and Stevenson.

My method, then, was not to confine my studies to Chesterton's literary criticism. It was, it is true, to proceed with the knowledge that I would have to make literary criticism the unifying principle of the paper. But I felt that if my comments on his literary criticism were not rooted in a knowledge of the growth of his philosophy towards orthodox

Christianity and in a knowledge of his championing of the poor--his political radicalism, I would be doing what Chesterton never does: I would be putting literature and literary criticism in a compartment separate from life.

* * *

In the first chapter of this dissertation I present an account of Chesterton's philosophy. This philosophy forms the foundation for his literary criticism.

In the second chapter I show how Chesterton's philosophy affects his view of particular writers. Here I divide logically according to the various elements of his philosophy, showing the relationship of each of the elements to the subjects of his criticism.

In the third chapter I point out the nature of various heresies which Chesterton finds in the works of literary men and the nature of his attacks ^{on} these heresies. These heresies are deviations from the main stream of the orthodox Christian tradition as interpreted by Chesterton.

In the first part of the fourth chapter I deal with Chesterton's analysis of the nature of Chaucer's personality and the significance of The Canterbury Tales. In the second part of the chapter I show how Chesterton, with one eye on the condition of modern society, employs the literature of the Middle Ages as a buttress for his contention that the

best features of the united Christendom of the medieval period furnish a norm.

CHAPTER ONE

CHESTERTON'S PHILOSOPHY

In this chapter I shall indicate that Chesterton's philosophy is based on an attitude towards experience which is poetic as distinguished from prosaic. I shall then break down this poetic attitude into its constituent parts. This resolution of the poetic attitude into its component parts will be my task in the first section of the chapter.

The second section of this chapter will show, more briefly, how Chesterton is able to bring this personal philosophy, the poetic attitude, into accord with orthodox Christian thought. I include Chesterton's orthodoxy under the general heading of his philosophy because his slant on orthodoxy is always startling, original, Chestertonian.

A. THE POETIC APPROACH TO REALITY

Affirmation of external reality

During the period from 1892 to 1895, Chesterton was a student at the Slade School of Art. That period covered the time between his eighteenth and twenty-first years. It was the formative stage, and for Chesterton a particularly trying one. Maisie Ward points out that "toward the end of his school life Gilbert's...mother took him to a doctor to be overhauled and was told that his brain was

the largest and most sensitive the doctor had ever seen.

'A genius or an idiot' was his verdict on the probabilities."¹

Since Chesterton entitles the chapter in his autobiography devoted to this formative period,² "How to be a Lunatic," it is apparent that, from the vantage point of an adult recollection, Chesterton considers that he was close to some form of idiocy. The particular form of his madness he narrows down to a doubt of the existence of anything outside his mind. Chesterton felt that he had reached his low ebb when he began to doubt the existence of external reality:

What surprises me in looking back on youth, and even on boyhood, is the extreme rapidity with which it can think its way back to fundamental things. At a very early age I had thought my way back to thought itself. It is a very dreadful thing to do; for it may lead to thinking that there is nothing but thought.³

The point to be emphasized about the preceding passage is that Chesterton was looking back to his youth. He is calling attention to a mood from which he reacted violently.

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 43.

2 It dawns on the reader slowly that the chapter is devoted to this exact period, since Chesterton has a horror of precise dates. He calls Shakespeare to his assistance: "As Orlando says to Rosalind, 'There is no clock in the forest.' The poet of the wood is free from all chains, but chiefly from the most galling and oppressive of all human chains--a watch chain." (Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 130:672, May 4, 1907.)

3 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 88.

Hence, his mature philosophy affirms, does not deny, external reality:

All my mental doors open outward into a world I have not made. When the modern mystics said they liked to see a post they meant they liked to imagine it.... To me the post is wonderful because it is there; there whether I like it or not.... For the amazing thing about the universe is that it exists, not that we can discuss its existence.¹

In his novels Chesterton creates characters who act as mouthpieces for his own ideas. That is, some of the characters talk like Chesterton. Others are straw men whom he creates to voice opposition to these ideas. Gabriel Gale, the poet of The Poet and the Lunatics, talks pure Chesterton. The straw men are lunatics of various kinds.

Gale represents the true poetic approach seen in connection with the problem of the ego versus external reality. He is faced with the lunacy of a theological student, "a real skeptic who doubts matter and the minds of others and everything except his own ego."² Gale's cure for the student's madness is highly fantastic. He pinions him to a tree with a pitchfork. The point, here a sharp one, is that Gale, in doing this, is making the student aware that there are things outside the mind. He is hurting in order

1 Chesterton, "Wonder and the Wooden Post," The Coloured Lands, p. 160.

2 Chesterton, "The Crime of Gabriel Gale," The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 124.

to help. He is bringing the student in contact with a particular reality--pain:

There is no cure for that nightmare of omnipotence except pain, because that is the thing a man knows he would not tolerate if he could really control it....and, God forgive me for the blasphemy, but I nailed him to a tree.¹

It should be noted that Gale voices Chesterton's mature philosophy. The theological student represents the error into which Chesterton fell before he achieved that philosophy.

I felt...as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with all its trees and its stars, and that is so near to the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad.²

Dorian Wimpole, a poet who appears in the story The Flying Inn, is another dramatization of Chesterton's intellectual experience. Unlike Gale, who is sane but static, Wimpole grows. He advances from a world of mirrors into a world of reality. He passes from "the mood of Maeterlinck into the mood of Whitman."³ He was "a man neither foolish nor evil, any more than Shelley; only a man made sterile by living in a world of indirectness and insincerity, with words rather than with things."⁴

1 Chesterton, "The Crime of Gabriel Gale," The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 125.

2 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 88.

3 Chesterton, The Flying Inn, p. 197.

4 Ibid., p. 191.

Chesterton illustrates Wimpole's growth by the following incident: Dorian has been abandoned in a forest by his chauffeur. He has been abandoned because he was so concentrated on himself that it never occurred to him that his chauffeur might be hungry. He had overlooked a very down-to-earth reality. The poet's reaction "was one of black and grinding hatred....He hit with his fists such trees as, I suppose, seemed...most reminiscent of the chauffeur.... The thoughtful reader will realize that Mr. Wimpole had already taken a considerable upward stride....The next best thing to really loving a fellow creature is really hating him....The desire to murder him is at least an acknowledgment that he is alive."¹

The basic tenet of that aspect of Chesterton's philosophy which I am discussing in this section is a broad one--concentration on reality versus concentration on self. Discussion of some of its ramifications is essential.

Chesterton felt that one of the manifestations of concentration on self, the ego, might be "detached intellectualism."² By this he meant that a real danger inhered in concentration on the logical faculty. The desirable poetic attitude, he felt, escaped from logic, found health in the

1 Chesterton, The Flying Inn, pp. 191-192.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 50.

imaginative faculty.

Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I...say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination....Moreover...when a poet really was morbid it was commonly because he had some weak spot of rationality on his brain. Poe... really was morbid; not because he was poetical, but because he was specially analytical....

The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.¹

Chesterton contends that for Cowper "poetry was not the disease, but the medicine; poetry kept him partly in health."² He asserts that Cowper was "driven mad by logic, by the ugly and alien logic of predestination."³

Chesterton felt that if one would achieve the desirable poetic attitude he must somehow escape from dominance by mere logic. I have called attention to some of the awful consequences which Chesterton felt might ensue from concentration solely on intellect. One of the escapes from this concentration he found in the imagination. Another escape was toward the "real things of the earth."⁴ I have already noted how Dorian Wimpole discovered the reality of hunger.

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 27-29.

2 Ibid., p. 28.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Ibid., p. 39.

Other realities that Chesterton stresses are "fighting people or proud mothers or first love or fear upon the sea."¹ He asserts that certain explanations of the world--materialism, for example--appear to cover everything. They are logically complete. But they overlook the "alien energies and the large indifference of the earth."² Logic tends to pin us into the small corner of reality called the human intellect. For Chesterton, "the post or any objective reality that one might care to name: a tree, a dog, a cat or a hat] is wonderful because it is there; there whether I like it or not."³

The sense of wonder

A second important tenet of Chesterton's philosophy is the sense of wonder. If one would have the desirable poetic attitude he must not only see external reality as distinct from his own ego; he must, in addition, experience the wonder of that reality.

Chesterton did not have this sense of wonder when he was living in that myopic period when he felt that the whole world was a projection of his own ego. But he did have it in his childhood.

What was wonderful about childhood is that anything in it was a wonder. It was not

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 39.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, "Wonder and the Wooden Post," The Coloured Lands, p. 160.

merely a world full of miracles; it was a miraculous world.¹

In his maturity Chesterton cultivated this sense of wonder. He was aware that one's approach might be either prosaic or poetic. In the following excerpt from a letter to his future wife, Frances Blogg, he pictures an experience prosaically, then poetically. The excerpt is ineffective unless quoted at length.

What we all say happens every day is this: I wake up: dress myself, eat bacon and bread and coffee for breakfast: walk up to High St. Station, take a fourpenny ticket for Blackfriars, read the Chronicle in the train, arrive at 11, Paternoster Buildings: read a MS called "The Lepers" (light comedy reading) and another called "The Preparation of Ryerson Embury"--you know the style--till 2 o'clock. Go out to lunch, have--(but here perhaps it would be safer to become vague), come back, work till six, take my hat and walking-stick and come home: have dinner at home, write the Novel till 11, then write to you and go to bed. That is what, we in our dreamy, deluded way, really imagine is the thing that happens. What really happens (but hist! are we observed?) is as follows.

Out of the starless night of the Uncreated, that was before the stars, a soul begins to grope back to light. It gropes its way through strange, half-lighted chambers of Dreams, where in a brown and gold twilight, it sees many things that are dimly significant, true stories twisted into new and amazing shapes, human beings whom it knew long ago, sitting at the windows by dark sunsets, or talking in dim meadows. But the awful invading light grows stronger in the dreams, till the soul in one

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 31-32.

last struggle, plunges into a body, as into a house and wakes up within it. Then he rises and finds himself in a wonderful vast world of white light and clear, frankly coloured shapes, an inheritor of a million stars. On enquiry he is informed that his name is Gilbert Keith Chesterton. This amuses him.

He goes through a number of extraordinary and fantastic rituals, which the pompous elfland he has entered demands. The first is that he shall get inside a house of clothing, a tower of wool and flax; that he shall put on this foolish armour solemnly, one piece after another and each in its right place. The things called sleeve-links he attends to minutely. His hair he beats angrily with a bristly tool. For this is the Law. Downstairs a more monstrous ceremony attends him. He has to put things inside himself. He does so, being naturally polite. Nor can it be denied that a weird satisfaction follows.

He takes a sword in his hand (for what may not befall him in so strange a country!) and goes forth: He finds a hole in the wall, a little cave wherein sits One who can give him the charm that rules the horse of water and fire. He finds an opening and descends into the bowels of the earth. Down, among the roots of the Eternal hills, he finds a sunless temple wherein he prays. And in the centre of it he finds a lighted temple in which he enters. Then there are noises as of an earthquake and smoke and fire in the darkness: and when he opens the door again he is in another temple, out of which he climbs into another world, leagues and leagues away. And when he asks the meaning of the vision, they talk gibberish and say, "It is a train."¹

This emphasis on wonder appears in his essays. "Strikes and the Spirit of Wonder" appears to be a strange title.

What can Chesterton possibly mean? In this essay he is again

¹ Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, pp. 115-116.

attacking the dull, pedestrian, prosaic attitude, the attitude that takes things for granted:

The stars will not go on strike or extinguish the illumination of the universe as the electricians would extinguish the illumination of the city. And so, while we repeat that there is a special providence in a falling star, we can ignore it in a fixed star. But when we at once ignore and assume thousands of thinking, brooding, free, lonely and capricious human creatures they will remind us that we can no more order souls than they can order stars. This primary duty of doubt and wonder has nothing to do with the rights or wrongs of special industrial quarrels.¹

Chesterton considered it to be the task of art and poetry to keep the sense of wonder alive.

Poetry is that separation of the soul from some object whereby we can regard it with wonder.²

The success of any work of art is achieved when we say of any subject, a tree, a cloud, or human character, 'I have seen that a thousand times and I never saw it before.'³

However, he was much annoyed by the endless disputes in regard to the nature of the artistic medium that would lead to this desirable end of stimulating wonder:

The things I like arguing about are absolute things: whether a proof is logical or whether a practice is just. I do not want to quarrel with anybody about whether being greenery--yallery in the nineteenth century was worse than being orangery--magenta in the twentieth.⁴

1 Chesterton, "Strikes and the Spirit of Wonder," Fancies versus Fads, p. 240.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 49.

3 Chesterton, Christendom in Dublin, p. 33.

4 Chesterton, "On Changes in Taste," Generally Speaking, p. 179.

He goes on to say: "Perhaps we may live to see a halo of holy wonder around the mug marked 'A present from Margate' and all the knickknacks of the seaside lodging house."¹

The mug from Margate provides a logical transition. Chesterton is insistent that wonder should be aroused even by what is apparently ordinary, especially by what is generally considered to be ordinary and conventional, or even as ugly as the mug from Margate. The poets of the Nineties demanded strange and unconventional things to arouse them. What Chesterton was stressing was that even ordinary things should awaken a sense of wonder. The enemy is always the dull sense of satisfaction. The most quoted observation in connection with this idea is his remark answering Oscar Wilde's epigram to the effect that we do not like sunsets because we do not have to pay for them. To this Chesterton answered, "We can pay for sunsets by not being Oscar Wilde."²

The name "Smith" would at first glance appear to be a dull, ordinary name. Chesterton would have us see its history. He calls attention to the thing behind the word, the importance and the color of the trade of the smith.³ Adam Wayne, the hero of The Napoleon of Notting Hill, is what Chesterton calls a small poet. "He was one of those to whom nature has given the desire without the power of poetic expres-

1 Chesterton, "On Changes in Taste," Generally Speaking, p. 179.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 104.

3 Chesterton, Manalive, p. 46.

sion."¹ Adam Wayne has a love for ordinary things. "He knew that in proper names themselves is half the poetry of all national poems."² Although this love awakens in him a sense of wonder, he is unable to communicate it; so he turns to "that life of open air and acted poetry of which all the poets of the earth have dreamed in vain, the life for which the Iliad is only a cheap substitute."³

The poet must continually strive to maintain the sense of wonder at things. In general it is achieved by trying to get a fresh view of an object or person, pretending that one has never seen them before. In Manalive, Innocent Smith retains his sense of wonder by calling his wife, in turn, Mary Brown, Mary Green, Mary Black, thereby having the joy both of change and of permanence.⁴ The poet Gabriel Gale achieves the same end by seeing everything upside down--by the simple expedient of bending forward and looking backward between his legs.

1 Chesterton, The Napoleon of Notting Hill, p. 132.

2 Ibid., p. 133.

3 Ibid., p. 133.

4 Chesterton, Manalive, p. 297. Chesterton says of Smith: "It is necessary to have poets actually to remind men that they are not dead yet." (Chesterton, Manalive, p. 227.) The significance of the name is interesting. "Innocent" symbolizes that attitude which is essential if one would experience wonder. The significance of "Smith" is that only the person who is himself ordinary can experience this wonder.

Simplicity of soul

When Chesterton said that he preferred "high living and plain thinking," to "plain living and high thinking,"¹ he was not merely toying with words. He was giving partial expression to an aspect of his philosophy that I attempt to summarize by the phrase "simplicity of soul."

In the following paragraph Chesterton does not use the word "simplicity," but I shall indicate that it may legitimately be substituted for the words "ordinary," "normal."

In short, oddities only strike ordinary people. Oddities do not strike odd people. That is why ordinary people have a much more exciting time; while odd people are always complaining of the dullness of life. This is also why the new novels die so quickly and why the old fairy tales endure forever. The old fairy tale makes the hero a normal boy. It is his adventures that are startling; they startle him because he is normal, but in the modern, psychological novel, the hero is abnormal; the center is not central.²

Again Chesterton writes:

It does not so very much matter whether a man eats a grilled tomato or a plain tomato. It does very much matter whether he eats a plain tomato with a grilled mind. The only kind of simplicity worth preserving is the simplicity of the heart, the simplicity which accepts and enjoys.³

1 Chesterton, "On Sandals and Simplicity," Heretics, p. 137.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 26.

3 Chesterton, "On Sandals and Simplicity," Heretics, p. 136.

In the first of the two preceding passages it should be noted that it is the ordinary people who have the adventures. Odd people suffer from ennui. So, in the second passage, simplicity is that which "accepts and enjoys."

In a continuation of this passage, after noting again that "the only simplicity that matters is the simplicity of the heart," he goes on to say that what he thinks he will gain from such simplicity is "virginity of the spirit, which enjoys with astonishment and fear."¹

The conclusion to be drawn is that having an adventurous life and, furthermore, being able to enjoy it as an adventure, are possible only to those who are simple and ordinary. I find the idea well summed up in the following statement: "The truth is that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by reducing our ego to zero."²

Two of Chesterton's fictional creations throw light on this idea of simplicity. Father Brown possesses simplicity of spirit. The series of stories which appeared in 1911 is called The Innocence of Father Brown. Chesterton's approach to this priest, a "Suffolk dumpling from East Anglia,"³ is comparable to what he says is the approach of the fairy tales: "The old fairy tale makes the hero a normal

1 Chesterton, "On Sandals and Simplicity," Heretics, p. 139.

2 Chesterton, "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson," Heretics, p. 164.

3 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 334.

boy; it is his adventures that are startling."¹ Father Brown's innocence and simplicity of spirit do not prevent him from having adventures. Because of his sanity and simplicity he is able, like the hero of the fairy tales, to perceive the adventurous nature of the topsy-turvy world in which Chesterton involves him.

On the other hand, in Phineas Salt, Chesterton creates a character who has lost his simplicity of soul.

The poet Phineas Salt was a man who had made himself master of everything, in a sort of frenzy of freedom and omnipotence. He had tried to feel everything, experience everything that could be or could not be.²

As a result of this complexity of spirit he can do nothing: "Mr. Hatt here told me that Phineas would sit staring at a blank sheet of paper; and I told him it was not because he had nothing to write about, but because he could write about anything."³

Salt regains his simplicity by rediscovering things

having to do with lollipops and ginger beer; to fall in love with the girl around the corner and feel awkward about it; to be young. That was the only paradise left virgin and unspoiled enough, in the imagination of a man who had turned the seven heavens upside down.⁴

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 26.

2 Chesterton, "The Purple Jewel," The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 232.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Ibid., pp. 232-233.

Appreciation of the grotesque

It is one thing to describe an interview with a gorgon or griffin, a creature who does not exist. It is another thing to discover that the rhinoceros does exist and then take pleasure in the fact that he looks as if he didn't.¹

Grotesqueness is the word which comes close to summing up the qualities which many people find puzzling and attractive in Chesterton. His imagination was luxuriant and gothic. The fantastic tale, The Man who was Thursday, subtitled, A Nightmare, is a good example of this characteristic.

Another example is furnished by an exchange of opinion with one Mr. McCabe, who had written:

The ballets of the Alhambra, and the fireworks of the Crystal Palace, and Mr. Chesterton's Daily News articles, have their place in life. But how a serious social student can think of curing the thoughtlessness of our generation by strained paradoxes; of giving people a sane grasp of social problems by literary sleight-of-hand; of settling important questions by a reckless shower of rocket metaphors and inaccurate "facts" and the substitution of imagination for judgment, I cannot see.²

Chesterton answered in the following manner. His answer is funny and wise--and fantastic. It is a great mistake, I think, to assume that it is merely fantastic.

The very fact that Mr. McCabe thinks of dancing as a thing belonging to some hired women at the Alhambra is an illustration of the same principle by which he is able to

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 17-18.

2 Chesterton, "Mr. McCabe and a Divine Frivolity," Heretics, pp. 219-220.

think of religion as a thing belonging to some hired men in white neckties. Both these things are things that should not be done for us but by us. If Mr. McCabe were really religious he would be happy. If he were really happy he would dance.

Briefly we may put the matter in this way. The main point of modern life is not that the Alhambra ballet has its place in life. The main point, the main enormous tragedy of modern life is that Mr. McCabe has not his place in the Alhambra ballet. The joy of changing and graceful posture, the joy of suiting the swing of music to the swing of limbs, the joy of whirling drapery, the joy of standing on one leg,--all these should belong by rights to Mr. McCabe and to me; in short, to the ordinary healthy citizen.¹

Chesterton was aware that his manner was often grotesque. He was insistent that whether or not the manner was grotesque had fundamentally nothing to do with the matter expressed.

The question of whether a man expresses himself in a grotesque or laughable phraseology, or in a stately and restrained phraseology, is not a question of motive or of moral state, it is a question of instinctive language and self-expression. Whether a man chooses to tell a truth in long sentences or short jokes is a problem analogous to whether he chooses to tell the truth in French or German. Whether a man preaches his gospel grotesquely or gravely is merely like the question of whether he preaches it in prose or verse.²

In this matter, at least, he finds Shaw a kindred spirit and defends him brilliantly. McCabe's contention is that both Shaw and Chesterton are fantastic and frivolous--i.e.,

1 Chesterton, "Mr. McCabe and a Divine Frivolity," Heretics, pp. 230-231.

2 Ibid., pp. 220-221.

not sincere. Chesterton answers, "I defy Mr. McCabe...to mention one...instance in which Mr. Shaw has, for the sake of wit or novelty, taken up any position which was not directly deducible from the body of his doctrines elsewhere expressed."¹

Although Chesterton found the grotesque attractive (the rhinoceros, for example) he was aware that it must be kept in its place. It must not be followed for its own sake. For example, The Man who was Thursday, although it is subtitled, A Nightmare, does not preach a nightmarish doctrine. Asked to explain the significance of the character called Sunday, Chesterton answered:

Well, I think, on the whole, and allowing for the fact that he is a person in a tale--I think you can take him to stand for Nature as distinguished from God. Huge, boisterous, full of vitality, dancing with a hundred legs, bright with the glare of the sun, and at first sight, somewhat regardless of us and our desires.²

In other words, in The Man who was Thursday, Chesterton has a doctrine to preach. However, he preaches it in a manner which is grotesque and fantastic, not austere and dignified.

Mystical materialism

Although Chesterton, reacting from that period in his life when he thought of mind as the only reality, does turn

¹ Chesterton, "Mr. McCabe and a Divine Frivolity," Heretics, p. 226.

² Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 193.

to the real things of the earth, he is not a materialist. A phrase which he employs to describe his position is "mystical materialism."¹ This mystical materialism he defines as the presence of "soul and substance together."² He felt that the poetic mind ought to be rooted in substance:

I think any poetic mind that has loved the thickness of trees, the squareness of stones, the firmness of clay, must have sometimes wished that they were things to eat.³

He praises the little girl who, observing the sea for the first time, said that it looked like cauliflowers. He calls this "pure literature, vivid, entirely independent and original, and perfectly true."⁴

What Chesterton implies here is that the little girl is thinking in terms of imagery. Because she is young, her vision is not marred by conventional thoughts about what she ought to see. She begins with the experience itself. He points out that the "aesthetic amateur," on the contrary, "would say that he knew what large and philosophical thoughts he ought to have by the boundless deep."⁵ The contrast sets up an apparently unbridgeable gap between the attitudes of the "aesthetic amateur" and the little girl. However, it

1 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 228.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, "The Appetite of Earth," Alarms and Discursions, p. 44.

4 Chesterton, "The Garden of the Sea," Alarms and Discursions, p. 208.

5 Ibid., p. 209.

appears from the following quotation that Chesterton was not denying that poetry and art are concerned with thoughts or abstractions. Rather, he was emphasizing a fusion of "soul and substance."

It is not merely that Blake did not mean that meekness was true and the lamb only a pretty fable. If anything he meant that meekness was a mere shadow of the everlasting lamb.¹

Love for the populace

We hear so much today about regard for the common man, the average man, the little man, that many people, perhaps rightly, associate all the phrases with the mouthings of insincere politicians. Chesterton's affection, however, was sincere and profound. This real sympathy with people is a very definite part of his philosophy.

It was characteristic of Chesterton to emphasize the things that are common to all men. In that sense he ignores all class distinctions:

The things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men.... The sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvel of power, intellect, art or civilization.... Having a nose is more comic even than having a Norman nose.²

But he was naturally aware that society does create classes, does emphasize "power, intellect, art." Hence,

1 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 142.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 82-83.

while he never ignored "the miracle of humanity" he did champion the populace, the mob, the poor.

I have always been more inclined to believe the ruck of hardworking people than to believe that special and troublesome literary class to which I belong....I would always trust the old wives' fables against the old maids' facts.¹

Chesterton was of the opinion that the fin de siècle poets, in their disdain for the vulgarity of the common life, were losing sight of the true function of the poet.

There is...an implied obligation in the poets that they shall express the people.... Because I pay Burns for expressing his love for a woman (which I feel but cannot express) it does not follow that I need pay him if he expresses his love for a she-rhinoceros, a sentiment which I do not feel, and do not even wish to feel.²

He sees the desirable poetic attitude as one which is able to "carry popular sentiments to a keener and more splendid pitch."³

The sense of limits

Another element of Chesterton's philosophy which it is possible to isolate and examine is his sense of limits. He writes:

It is plain on the face of the facts that the child is positively in love with limits.

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 87.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 134:656, May 8, 1909.

3 Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," Alarms and Discursions, p. 149.

He uses his imagination to invent imaginary limits. The nurse and the governess have never told him that it is his moral duty to step on alternate paving stones.... This game of self-limitation...is dominated by this principle of division and restriction; which begins with the game played by the child with the paving stones.¹

Chesterton attempted to maintain the sense of wonder, which was strongest in childhood, throughout his life. He also observes that the sense of limits is something he retained in maturity:

All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary lines that bring one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window.²

Edwin Muir observes that Chesterton's constant attacks on the religions of the East strike him as the only example in Chesterton's works of sham rhetoric.³ On the contrary, his attitude toward them is of central importance.⁴ His remarks concerning the relationship between the person whom he calls the poet and this sense of limits are clarified by a knowledge of his beliefs concerning the religion and philosophy of the East. In the following paragraph, Lord Ivywood gives partial expression to what Chesterton considers to be an undesirable Eastern attitude.

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 104-5.

2 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

3 Edwin Muir, The Present Age, p. 159.

4 See Poe-Stevenson comparison in Chapter Two, pp. 77-78.

Dorian Wimpole is the poet of The Flying Inn, who undergoes a kind of conversion. Originally a rather futile example of the aesthete, in the end he becomes a mouthpiece for the Chestertonian ideas. The conversation which follows is between Lord Ivywood, who has been influenced by the Turk, Misysra Ammon, and Wimpole. Lord Ivywood speaks:

I want to change the very nature of Art.
Everything lives by turning into something
else. Exaggeration is growth....I should
like the centaur to turn into something
else that is neither man nor horse.

Dorian then argues that "this prime factor of identity is the limit set on all things." When Ivywood denies that any such limit need be set, Dorian answers that he understands why, though Ivywood is a good speechmaker, he is not a poet.

I think my complaint is that he has no
pathos. That is, he does not feel human
limitations. That is, he will not write
poetry.¹

The idea that poetry needs to realize the fruitfulness of human limitations is perhaps one that appears obscure because of Chesterton's unusual illustrations of it. It is made clearer by his contention that "art is the enemy of the infinite."² Ivywood is the kind of person who will never write poetry because his is the kind of "detached intellectualism"³ that wants to break through all barriers. He

1 Chesterton, The Flying Inn, pp. 253-255.

2 Chesterton, "A Defense of Dramatic Unities," Fancies versus Fads, p. 113.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 50.

prefers the infinite to the finite.

B. ORTHODOXY

A noteworthy fact about Chesterton is that he does not desire to have his philosophy remain a private philosophy. By that I do not mean that he desires others to adopt it because it is his. His tendency, rather, is to attempt to bring his private philosophy into line with Christian tradition or with orthodox Christian thought.

If I had wandered away like Bergson or Bernard Shaw, and made up my own philosophy out of my own precious fragment of truth, merely because I had found it for myself, I should soon have found that truth distorting itself into a falsehood....

I have therefore come to the conclusion that there is a complete contemporary fallacy about the liberty of individual ideas; that such flowers grow best in a garden;...and that in the wilderness they wither and die.¹

I shall indicate how Chesterton finds relationship between each of the various elements of his philosophy and the Christian tradition. The relationship may be between his thought and Christianity in general, or between his thought and some doctrine of Roman Catholicism.

Affirmation of external reality

By insisting specially on the immanence of God, we get introspection, self-isolation, quietism, social indifference--Tibet. By

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 352.

insisting specially on the transcendence of
 God we get wonder, curiosity, moral and
 political adventure, righteous indignation--
 Christendom.¹

Chesterton found that Christianity was a religion which confirmed his view that his adolescent myopia was dangerous. A real parallel exists between his treatment of that period of his life when he felt that he had "projected the universe from within" and his treatment of various Eastern doctrines. He notes that the Buddhist seeks for truth within himself. "The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inward."²

The connection that may be observed between his own affirmation of reality and his interpretation of Christianity may be arrived at by asking the question: Where is God? Chesterton's impulse was to stress the existence of things apart from himself. "My mental doors open...into a world I have not made....To me the post is wonderful because it is there...whether I like it or not."³ He separated his ego from God's creation. Hence, he speaks of "this Christian admiration (which strikes outward, toward a Deity distinct from the worshipper)."⁴ Again, "the Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outward."⁵ "The Christian saint... is separate from things and is staring at them in astonishment."⁶

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 250.

2 Ibid., p. 243.

3 Chesterton, "Wonder and the Wooden Post," The Coloured Lands, p. 160.

4 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 247.

5 Ibid., p. 243.

6 Ibid., p. 247.

Chesterton and traditional Christianity met, then, on the point that God is not to be pursued "into deeper and deeper rings of the labyrinth of our own ego."¹ Such an introversion, which was characteristic of Chesterton in his adolescent period, he finds to be the essence of Buddhism and what distinguishes Buddhism for him from the healthier affirmation of reality to be found in Christianity.²

The sense of wonder

The sense of wonder, for Chesterton, meant astonishment at things. I have already described the various ramifications of this idea. Again, he finds a significant relationship between his ideas and the Christian tradition.

He asks how the Buddhist saint can really be astonished at things,

since there is really only one thing and that, being impersonal, can hardly be astonished at itself. There have been pantheist poems suggesting wonder, but no really successful ones. The pantheist cannot wonder, for he cannot praise God or praise anything as really distinct from himself.³

Christianity, however, because it "separates and sets free,"⁴ does make this sense of wonder possible. "The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outwards."⁵ "The Christian saint is happy because he has verily been cut off

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 249.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Ibid., p. 247.

4 Ibid., p. 246.

5 Ibid., p. 243.

from the world; he is separate from things and is staring at them in astonishment."¹

Simplicity of soul

Chesterton discovered a real relationship between his notion of simplicity and Christian doctrine. The particular Christian teaching which corresponds to his own idea about "reducing our ego to zero"² is that of humility. He points to the connection between humility and his own "secret of antiseptic simplicity"³ in his autobiography. He goes on to say, "I was more and more disposed to seek out those who specialized in humility."⁴ In short, Chesterton's desire is to find some connection between his private insight about the "simplicity which accepts and enjoys"⁵ and Christian thought. He anticipates a reply:

What nonsense all this is; do you mean that a poet cannot be thankful for grass and wild flowers without connecting it with theology; let alone your theology? To which I answer, "Yes; I mean he cannot do it without connecting it with theology, unless he can do it without connecting it with thought."⁶

Appreciation of the grotesque

In the first section of this chapter, I noted Chesterton's personal liking for the grotesque in art. On this matter too, a parallel exists between Chesterton's personal

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 247.

2 Chesterton, "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson," Heretics, p. 164.

3 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 346.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Chesterton, "On Sandals and Simplicity," Heretics, p. 136.

6 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 348.

idiosyncrasy and the Christian tradition. He finds in the Gothic cathedral a lasting monument to Christianity's appreciation of the place of the grotesque. A favorite comparison of his is between the austere dignity of the Greek temple and the rank energy of the cathedral, with its grinning gargoyles and strange creatures, all existing in their own right but subordinated to a magnificent plan.¹

Greek heroes do not grin: but gargoyles do--because they are Christian. And when a Christian is pleased, he is (in the most exact sense) frightfully pleased; his pleasure is frightful. Christ prophesied the whole of Gothic architecture in that hour when nervous and respectable people (such people as now object to barrel organs) objected to the shouting of the guttersnipes of Jerusalem. He said, "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out."²

Mystical materialism

Chesterton's personal appreciation of the need for a mystical materialism is answered by the Christian sacramentalism. He notes that a mystical materialism was one of the chief identifying marks of Christianity, that this mystical materialism distinguished it from those religions which considered it degrading that God should become incarnate.³ His very phrase descriptive of mystical materialism, the union of "soul and substance," suggests the idea of the Incarnation.

1 Chesterton, "A Defense of Ugly Things," The Defendant, p. 86.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 188.

3 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. 26.

Love for the populace

The single outstanding fact about the relationship between Chesterton's love for the people and the Christian position on that subject is that Christianity attempted to codify into a doctrine. At one extreme is Chesterton's Whitmanesque emotion for the divine democracy.¹ This emotion represented his initial attitude. The relationship between that attitude and the Christian creed (here specifically Catholicism) he clarifies in the following passage:

I like to think of the face of Mr. Mencken of Baltimore if some casual comrade from Pittsburgh tried to make him unconquerable by putting an arm around his neck. But the idea is dead for much less ferocious people than Mr. Mencken....

It is not dead in me. It remains real for me not by any merit of mine, but by the fact that this mystical idea, while it has evaporated as a mood, still exists as a creed. I am perfectly prepared to assert, as I should have asserted in my boyhood, that the humpback and half-witted Negro is decorated with a nimbus of gold-coloured light.²

The sense of limits

Chesterton had a voracious appetite for dogma as dogma. He did choose Christian dogma, ultimately Roman Catholic dogma; but he preferred any rules to vague tendency or drifting:

1 Chesterton, The Wild Knight, *passim*.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, pp. 16-17.

After all, if we wish to protect the poor we shall be in favor of fixed rules and clear dogmas. The rules of a club are occasionally in favor of the poor member. The drift of a club is always in favor of the rich one.¹

That aspect of Chesterton's philosophy which is at the root of his acceptance and advocacy of Christian dogma, I have treated under the "sense of limits." When Chesterton said: "All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary line that brings one thing sharply against another,"² he was voicing that opposition to vagueness and drift which finds one expression in dogma.

The reason Chesterton accepted Christian dogma is most clearly expounded in Orthodoxy. There he argues that all systems of thought must limit and exclude.

In one sense, of course, all intelligent ideas are narrow. They cannot be broader than themselves. A Christian is only restricted in the same sense that an atheist is restricted. He cannot think Christianity false and continue to be a Christian; and the atheist cannot think atheism false and continue to be an atheist.³

Chesterton accepted traditional orthodox Christianity, then, because he found that the dogma which it set forth had a permanent vitality. Its vetoes were not narrow and crippling. Thus, he argues that a typical Christian must not

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 262.

2 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 25.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 41.

believe in determinism, if he is to remain a Christian. But, on the other hand, a typical materialist must not believe in fairies and miracles, if he is to remain a materialist.¹ Chesterton prefers, hence chooses, the dogma which allows him to believe in fairies and miracles.

¹ Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 41.

CHAPTER TWO

APPRECIATIVE CRITICISM

In the chapter which follows, I shall describe the nature of Chesterton's appreciative criticism. A later chapter will concentrate on Chesterton as judicial critic. Here, I wish to show how Chesterton enters into the spirit of the various writers who form the subject matter of his criticism, finding kinship in mood and in idea. To prevent the chapter from becoming a vague and shapeless appreciation of appreciative criticism, I propose to limit myself to what Chesterton says about these writers in relation to the principles outlined in Chapter One.

Here, some statement is needed relative to the purpose and direction of the chapter. The most important single fact about Chesterton is that his intuitions, his statements of attitudes essential to the poetic view of reality, all lead him toward Christian orthodoxy. Orthodoxy satisfies his instincts, his first gropings for the truth. However, the writers who are the subject of the literary criticism dealt with in this chapter do not necessarily see Christian orthodoxy as Chesterton saw it. Yet his enthusiasm for them is genuine. What is the bond between them and Chesterton? If their appeal to him is not in what they

think, wherein does it lie?

They are all either in revolt against what is offered them in the name of some current philosophy, or they instinctively reject the inhuman portion of that philosophy which they have accepted. For example, "All that long agony of lucidity and masterful logic [Scottish Calvinism] ended at last...with a laugh; and the laugh was Robert Louis Stevenson."¹ In the same manner, Chesterton writes, "Whenever the Liberal philosophy had embedded in it something hard and heavy and lifeless, by an instinct he [Charles Dickens] dropped it out."² While all of the writers discussed in this chapter do not necessarily give evidence of sharing in all aspects of the poetic attitude which Chesterton finds desirable, they have in common an affirmation of life; they voice a common yea to experience. They prefer reality to their moods. In that respect they all provide ammunition for Chesterton's fight on the pessimists and the aesthetic poseurs of the Nineties.

Most literary critics will accept as a fact that Browning's attitude and language are often grotesque; or that Dickens has the capacity for presenting rich, varied human types; or that there is something hard and metallic

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 83.

2 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 101.

in Stevenson's craftsmanship. In one sense we are scarcely conscious of these characteristics, because they seem too obvious to mention. To elaborate on such distinctions is much like pointing out the difference between a tree and a turtle. Chesterton, however, is not content merely to proceed from the starting point of such assumptions. His method is to explore the subconscious part of the author's mind, to try to guess why a writer is grotesque, or fastidious, or filled with gusto and joy.

The function of criticism...can only be one function--that of dealing with the subconscious part of the author's mind which only the critic can express.... Either criticism is no good at all... or else criticism means saying about an author the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.¹

How can a critic get into the subconscious part of an author's mind? The first step is obviously an imaginative identification with the subject. Chesterton, the literary critic, is here like Father Brown, his priest-detective. The latter attempts to get inside the mind of the criminal. He finds the Sherlock Holmes method, the painstaking attention to tangible evidence, inadequate. Rather, he would penetrate into the mind of the criminal in order to experience, imaginatively, some of the same feelings that gave

¹ Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, pp. 51-52.

rise to a particular crime.

I try to get inside the murderer....
indeed it's much more than that, don't
you see? I am inside a man. I am
always inside a man, moving his arms
and legs; but I wait till I know I am
inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts,
wrestling with his passions.¹

Chesterton's approach to literary criticism is comparable. He, too, in his approach to the particular writer, does not attempt to work up a carefully documented study any more than Father Brown tries to build a case based on the conventional documentation of the detective: cigarette butts, or stray bits of hair, or automobile tire marks.

The question now arises as to what Chesterton will do once he has penetrated the writer's subconscious. What he does, as I hope to make clear in this chapter, is to guess, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes merely inaccurately. At any rate, he tends to proceed with the various attitudes that I discussed in Chapter One, employing them not as rigid standards but as flexible means for illuminating the nature of the writer's mind and work.

Affirmation of external reality

Chesterton points out that to his Victorian critics, Cobbett was often no more than an outspoken crank. In William Cobbett, Chesterton presents a defense of his sub-

¹ Chesterton, "The Secret of Father Brown," The Father Brown Omnibus, p. 639.

ject in the form of an appreciative interpretation. What Chesterton stresses is Cobbett's grasp of, and ringing proclamation of, certain plain, blunt realities. Chesterton is equipped to interpret his subject in relation to such an affirmation of reality. As I pointed out in Chapter One, such an affirmation is a part of Chesterton's philosophy.

Chesterton contends that it was because Cobbett's critics had fallen victim to various unreal abstractions that they failed to understand him:

He would have been as ready as any merchant or trader to face the fact that man as God has made him must make money. But he had a vivid sense that the money must be as solid and honest as the corn and fruit for which it stood, that it must be closely in touch with the realities that it represented; and he waged a furious war on all those indirect and sometimes imaginary processes of debts and shares and promises and percentages which make the world of wealth today a world at the worst unreal, and at the best unseen....In any case against a world in which such financial mysteries were multiplying every day, in which machinery was everywhere on the march, and the new towns spreading with the swiftness of a landslide, in which England was already well on the way to becoming merely the workshop of the world...there remained in him unaltered, cut deep into the solitary rock of his soul, the single clause of his single Creed: that God made man to plow and reap and sow.¹

In the preceding passage, Chesterton is rhetorical, but not rhetorical in a vague or cloudy manner. He presents

¹ Chesterton, William Cobbett, pp.32-33.

with great clarity a sharp contrast between true realities and certain abstractions which were alleged to be the realities by those whom Cobbett confronted and combatted.

In the chapter of his study of Cobbett entitled "The Tragedy of the Patriot," Chesterton seeks to explain Cobbett's alleged shift in politics. He asserts that Cobbett was fundamentally consistent,

as men go, quite consistent....I do not mean that he had no inconsistencies; he had a great many. He had all those inconsistencies of mere verbal variation which are almost invariable in a man who throws himself with equal vehemence into the proving of many different propositions in many different connections.¹

Chesterton's phrase, "a world at the worst unreal," clarifies his position concerning Cobbett's alleged shift in politics. Here, too, the assertion is that the tags, the labels, were unreal. The world of politics was as unreal as the world of finance; hence it was Cobbett who was consistent, who had his eyes fixed on realities:

The Tories could pose as the Agricultural Party; if only a party of squires and not of peasants. But it was no longer a real war, like the war between Parliament and the King in which Parliament had finally triumphed. The new Whigs and Tories were only two different shades of the same colour, like the dark blue of the Tory University and the light blue of the Whig University.²

1 Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 72.

2 Ibid., pp. 78-79.

In short, Cobbett "did not start with theories but with things: with the things he saw."¹

Chesterton not only preferred things to theories; he preferred short words, representative of unmistakable things, to long words. Chesterton felt that the tendency to use the polysyllabic word was indicative of a sleepiness present in the thinkers of his age. He attempted to teach by shocking. Both Belloc and Kenner have observed that Chesterton was particularly gifted as a teacher.² Now one of Chesterton's methods of teaching was a proceeding from the foggy, long word to the pungent, short word. More specifically, to attack what he considered an erroneous argument, he would substitute for the august, yet foggy keyword, a humbler word about whose meaning no one could possibly be in doubt. In doing this he cast a glaring light on the folly present in the original argument. For example:

The first argument is that man has no conscience because some men are quite mad, and therefore not particularly conscientious. The second argument is that man has no conscience because some men are more conscientious than others. And the third is that man has no conscience because conscientious men in different countries and quite different circumstances often do very different things. Professor Forel applies these arguments eloquently to the question of human consciences; and I

1 Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 227.

2 Hilaire Belloc, On The Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters, p. 39; Hugh Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, passim.

really cannot see why I should not apply them to the question of human noses. Man has no nose because now and then a man has no nose--I believe Sir William Davenant, the poet, had none. Man has no nose because some noses are longer than others, or can smell better than others. Man has no nose because not only are noses of different shape but (oh, piercing sword of skepticism!) some men use their noses and find the smell of incense nice, while some use their noses and find it nasty. Science therefore declares that man is normally noseless; and will take this for granted in the next four or five hundred pages, and will treat all the alleged noses of history as the quaint legends of a credulous age.¹

It is this same faculty of appealing directly to a short word representative of some unmistakable reality that he admires in Cobbett:

He would have said that when he found a man robbing his hen roost he called out 'Stop, thief!' and not 'Stop, philosophical communist invading the thesis of private property!' He would have said that when a man told lies he called him a liar and not a person insensible to the value of objective reality.²

Turning to Chesterton's remarks on Dickens, one finds that he, like Cobbett, like all the recipients of Chesterton's praise, is also soaked in reality, the enemy of the merely rationalistic. "In everybody there is a certain

1 Chesterton, "On Pseudo-Scientific Books," The Uses of Diversity, pp. 93-94.

2 Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 172.

thing that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight; that thing enjoys Dickens."¹ To the madman, carried away by his own monomaniac theory, Chesterton gives the advice to look to "the real things of the earth, of fighting peoples or proud mothers, or first love or fear upon the sea."² In other words, Chesterton asks the madman to see those very realities, plain things, vigorous emotions and experiences, that he asks his readers to see in Dickens.

Chesterton classes Dickens among the optimistic reformers.³ That is, they are the ones who believe in the dignity of man. Hence, when they look at conditions as they are, they are apt to be filled with astonishment and anger. Like Chesterton looking at a sunset or hippopotamus and asking "Are these strange wonders possible?" they ask, "Is this injustice possible?" In short, there is no tired, sophisticated acceptance of the way of the world.

The French Revolution was a much simpler world than Carlyle could understand; for Carlyle was subtle and not simple. Dickens could understand it because he was simple and not subtle. He understood that plain rage against plain political injustice; he understood again that obvious vindictiveness and that obvious brutality which followed. "Cruelty and the abuse of absolute power," he told an American slave owner,

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 85.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 31.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 12-17.

"are two of the bad passions of human nature." Carlyle was quite incapable of rising to the height of that uplifted common sense.¹

In his various studies of Dickens, Chesterton discusses Dickens as Socialist, or Dickens as Liberal. He does not deny that Dickens shared many of the ideas and sentiments advanced by both Liberalism and Socialism. Chesterton was certainly aware that it is almost impossible to engage in literary criticism without employing some general categories. But the category may become the fixed theory discussed in Orthodoxy, the theory which loses sight of reality. Hence, although Chesterton writes an excellent appreciation of the Liberalism and Radicalism of the age in which Dickens was born, he is never in danger of falling into a pigeon-holing tendency. Chesterton, in short, gets inside his subject. He sympathetically perceives Dickens' scorn for many of the nineteenth century social theories.

In the last book he wrote he gives us, in Mr. Honeythunder, a hateful and wholesome picture of all the liberal catch-words pouring out of one illiberal man. But perhaps the best evidence of this steadiness and sanity is the fact that dogmatic as he was he never tied himself to any passing dogma; he never got into any cul de sac of civic or economic fanaticism; he went down the broad road of Revolution....He was a fierce Radical; but he was never a Manchester Radical. He used the test of utility, but he was

1 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, pp. 195-196.

never a Utilitarian. While economists were writing soft words, he wrote "Hard Times," which Macaulay calls "sullen socialism" because it was not complacent Whiggism. But Dickens was never a Socialist any more than he was an individualist; and whatever else he was, he certainly was not sullen.... He...perceived that any theory that tried to run the living State entirely on one force and motive was probably nonsense. Whenever the Liberal philosophy had imbedded in it something hard and heavy and lifeless, by an instinct he dropped it out. He was too romantic perhaps, but he would have to do only with real things. He may have cared too much about Liberty but he cared nothing about Laissez Faire.¹

There is much in the preceding passage which is autobiographical. It tells us as much about Chesterton as it does about Dickens. However, those lines which illuminate the critic as much as the subject are not obvious. Yet they are important enough to call attention to. In the preceding passage, Chesterton says that "dogmatic as he [Dickens] was, he never tied himself to any passing dogma." Chesterton, too, was dogmatic. His embracing of the dogmas of Christian orthodoxy and ultimately of Roman Catholicism was his attempt to find a dogma that was not a "passing dogma."

The emphasis of the passage quoted, however, is not on Dickens as dogmatist. It is on Dickens' escape from inadequate dogmas or theories to realities. Dickens is

¹ Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 101-102.

not a "Manchester Radical" but a "fierce Radical." Dickens is not a Utilitarian, but he employs the "test of utility."

The importance which Chesterton assigns to Dickens' fierce revolt against theories is great. It explains for him most of Dickens' revolt against social conditions in the England of the middle of the nineteenth century. Chesterton asks us to consider the implications of Dickens' attack on Mr. Bumble. His conclusion is that Dickens "makes game of Mr. Bumble because he wants to kill Mr. Bumble."¹

Chesterton stresses the fighting spirit of Dickens much as he stresses the fighting spirit of Cobbett. In the following passage it should be noted that Chesterton is assigning to Dickens much the same dislike of long words representative of remote theories that he assigns to Cobbett. Cobbett prefers "liar" to "person insensible to the value of objective reality." In the same manner, Chesterton asserts that Dickens prefers the "revolt of the weak against the strong" to any studious analysis that might attempt, through the use of polysyllables, to convey a comparable idea:

The world was full or radicals and reformers; but only too many of them took the line of attacking everything

¹ Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 44.

and anything that was opposed to some particular theory among the many political theories that possessed the end of the eighteenth century....

This is where Dickens' social revolt is of more value than mere politics and avoids the vulgarity of the novel with a purpose. His revolt is not a revolt of the commercialist against the feudalist, or the Nonconformist against the Churchman, of the free trader against the protectionist, of the Liberal against the Tory.... His revolt was simply and solely the eternal revolt; it was the revolt of the weak against the strong.¹

In Browning, too, Chesterton observes a preference for realities as distinct from theories. Chesterton, it is true, at least entertains the possibility that Browning would be less scornful of theories than Dickens. But he insists that those theories would occupy a secondary position:

If a man had gone up to Browning and asked him with all the solemnity of the eccentric, "Do you think life is worth living?" it is interesting to conjecture what his answer might have been.... If...he had been influenced by his own serious intellectual theories he would have said..."Existence is justified by its incompleteness." But if he ...had simply answered the question...with the real, vital answer that awaited it in his own soul, he would have said..."Crimson toadstools in Hampshire."²

In short, Chesterton felt that for Browning "the great,

1 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 46.

2 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 182.

concrete experiences which God made always came first; his own deductions and speculations about them always second."¹

The sense of wonder

The sense of wonder at creation is one of Chesterton's key attitudes. I have already cited various examples of the way he continued to remind himself of that wonder whenever his perceptions might become dulled. Furthermore, it is for Chesterton an essential part of that poetic attitude for which he searches in the subjects of his appreciative criticism. It is closely linked to the concepts of simplicity and the grotesque. "Oddities [the grotesque] only strike ordinary people [simplicity]." ² The sense of wonder merely lays emphasis on the striking. In the following passage, Chesterton asserts that Browning's use of the grotesque serves as a stimulus to the sense of wonder:

There is another but slightly different use of the grotesque, but which is definitely valuable in Browning's poetry, and indeed in all poetry.³ To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself.... Now it is the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world

¹ Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 183.

² Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 26.

³ This passage ought to be compared to one written twenty-seven years later. The quotation from The Thing cited in Chapter One again stresses the fact that poetry "is that separation of the soul from some object whereby we can regard it with wonder." (Chesterton, The Thing, p. 49.)

stand on its head that people may look at it. If we say a "man is a man" we awaken no sense of the fantastic, however much we ought to, but if we say in the language of the old satirist that "man is a two-legged bird without feathers" the phrase does for a moment make us look at man from the outside and gives us a thrill in his presence.¹

In Chapter One I observed that even apparently ordinary things aroused Chesterton's sense of wonder. He finds a similar response to the ordinary in Browning, an employment of "homely and practical images...bordering on what many would call the commonplace."² It is particularly in the Dramatic Lyrics that Chesterton finds Browning expressing himself through the medium of this commonplace imagery which expresses "almost to perfection the real wonder land of youth."³

The imagery of these poems consists, if we may take a rapid survey of Browning's love poetry, of suburban streets, straws, garden rakes, medicine bottles, pianos, window blinds, burnt cork, fashionable fur coats.⁴

Just as Chesterton himself did not need strange things to arouse his sense of wonder, so he conceives of Browning as not needing "the ideal imagery of most poets of love."⁵

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 151.

2 Ibid., p. 49.

3 Ibid., p. 48.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Loc. cit.

Chesterton pictures Browning as simply possessing a sense of wonder. He observes that Stevenson attempted to recapture a "whole world that shone with wonder."¹ His theory is that Stevenson was like "a prisoner [who] was led in chains from the prison of Puritanism to the prison of Pessimism."² But Stevenson, Chesterton feels, somehow managed to escape. He "barricaded himself in the nursery."³ In order to recapture wonder, however, to free himself from the dismal atmosphere of both Puritanism and pessimism, Stevenson found it necessary to reject both sex in its more ugly aspects (as it was being described by the realists and pessimists), and "normal romantic love."⁴

Chesterton interprets the absence of romantic love or sex (or the light touching upon them) in Kidnapped, Catronia and Treasure Island to be indicative of Stevenson's desire to escape to a childhood world of wonder. In his interpretation, Chesterton leans heavily on his distinction between the "memory of the loves of youth" and the "memory of childhood."

The former is always narrow and individual, piercing the heart like a rapier; but the latter is like a flash of lightning, for one split second revealing a whole varied landscape; it is not the

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 240.

2 Ibid., p. 233.

3 Ibid., p. 234.

4 Ibid., p. 239.

memory of a particular pleasure any more than of a particular pain, but of a whole world that shone with wonder. The first is only a lover remembering love; the second is like a dead man remembering life.¹

Simplicity of soul

One of the principles discussed in Chapter One was that the creative writer must be of simple temperament. He must not turn his gaze inward to a complex personality; rather he must reduce his "ego to zero."² He must gaze outward to a world he has not made.³ This is a constantly recurring theme in all of Chesterton's writings. The basic idea is that "oddities only strike ordinary people, oddities do not strike odd people."⁴ Phineas Salt attempts to recapture simplicity by rediscovering things "having to do with lollipops and ginger beer."⁵ Gabriel Gale, representative of sanity in a world of lunatics which thinks him mad, is bewildered by the unreality of the complex financial abstractions which fill the minds of business men. His simplicity of soul prompts him to find satisfaction in realities like sunsets.⁶ Chesterton does not attribute to Shakespeare a complicated artistic personality. He conceives of him as simple and sane. "If Shakespeare ever really held horses,

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, pp. 239-240.

2 Chesterton, "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson," Heretics, p. 164.

3 Chesterton, "Wonder and the Wooden Post," The Coloured Lands, p. 160.

4 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 26.

5 Chesterton, "The Purple Jewel," The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 232.

6 Ibid., passim.

it was because he was much the safest man to hold them."¹

Of central importance in Chesterton's appreciation of Dickens is the contention that Dickens, too, possessed simplicity of soul. In the following passage Chesterton stresses the point that Dickens was sane and simple, that he had no desire for strange or eccentric experiences:

Dickens, I repeat, had common sense and uncommon sensibility. That is to say, the proportion of interest in him was about the same as that of an ordinary man, but he felt all of them more excitedly. This is a distinction not easy for us to keep in mind because we hear today chiefly of two types, the dull man who likes ordinary things mildly, and the extraordinary man who likes extraordinary things wildly. But Dickens liked quite ordinary things; he merely made an extraordinary fuss about them....His excitement was sometimes like an epileptic fit, but it must not be confused with the fury of the man with one idea or one line of ideas. He had the excess of the eccentric but not the narrowness....He had no particular spot of sensibility or spot of insensibility;....He was merely a normal man minus a normal self-command. He had no special point of mental pain or repugnance like Ruskin's horror of steam and iron or Mr. Bernard Shaw's permanent irritation against romantic love. He was annoyed at the ordinary annoyances, only he was more annoyed than was necessary. He did not desire strange delights, blue wine or black women with Eudelaire or cruel sights east of Suez with Mr. Kipling. He wanted what a healthy man wants only he was ill with wanting it.²

In the preceding passage, the distinction between cen-

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 27.

2 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 99.

trality, or centricity, and eccentricity is important. The great writers, according to Chesterton, are central and can perceive eccentricity. The minor writers, particularly minor poets, tend to be eccentric. Like Shaw or Ruskin, they have a tendency toward a monomaniac irritation at "romantic love" or "steam or iron." The implication of the passage quoted is that Dickens shares Shakespeare's greatness, insofar as greatness is to be associated with a kind of simplicity of spirit, sanity, centrality, that would not scorn the holding of horses and would prefer the holding of horses to the eccentric delights of "blue wine or black women...or cruel sights east of Suez."

It is worth noting, at this point, that eccentricity, for Chesterton, largely means exaggeration of some aspect of one's self. Centricity is being at the center, from whence one can perceive eccentricities. It is, in other words, forgetfulness of self. From that point of view, what I have been calling simplicity is very much like the doctrine of humility which Chesterton was preaching all his life and which he said would constitute the subject matter of the one speech he would make, if he could make only one.¹

¹ Chesterton, "On Preaching," Come to Think of It, p. 136.

I have indicated that Chesterton finds in Dickens the simplicity and humility of an ordinary man, that he finds no trace of a complex artistic temperament. He says much the same thing, not only of Dickens, but of Dickens' character, Toots:

Lastly there is the admirable study of Toots, who may be considered as being in some ways the masterpiece of Dickens. Nowhere else did Dickens express with such astonishing insight and truth his main contention, which was that to be good and idiotic is not a poor fate, but, on the contrary, an experience of primeval innocence....The particular thing [Dickens] had to preach was this: that humility is the only possible basis of enjoyment....That is the deep ...truth in the character of Toots-- that all his externals are flashy and false; all his internals unconscious, obscure and true....With the clear eyes of humility he perceives the world as it is.¹

In Chapter One I noted Chesterton's contention that if a hero is to have adventures he must be normal, must possess simplicity of soul. "The old fairy tale makes the hero a normal boy. It is his adventures that are startling."² Chesterton's interpretation of Samuel Pickwick is merely an extension of this idea:

Pickwick...is a romance of adventure, and Samuel Pickwick is the romantic adventurer. But the strange...discov-

1 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 127.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 26.

ery which Dickens made was...that having chosen a fat, old man of the middle classes as a good thing of which to make a butt, he found that a fat, old man of the middle classes is the very best thing of which to make a romantic adventurer.¹

Chesterton observes that "there is nothing that so much needs simplicity as adventure. And there is no one who so much possesses simplicity as an honest and elderly man of business....The round, moon-like face, the round, moon-like spectacles of Samuel Pickwick move through the tale as emblems of a certain spherical simplicity."²

Chesterton appears to be restating his view of Toots. Like Toots, "Pickwick goes through life with that God-like gullibility which is the key to all adventures."³ In short, he possesses simplicity of soul.

It is difficult for a critic to escape noticing that Dickens' works are full of satire. What characterizes Chesterton's remarks on this subject is the attempt to fathom the source of the satire. Proceeding from his assumption that Dickens has simplicity of soul, Chesterton goes on to assert that real satire is impossible unless such simplicity is present:

A modern man like Nietschze, a modern
man like Gorky, a modern man like

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 75.

2 Ibid., pp. 75-76.

3 Ibid., p. 78.

D'Annunzio could not possibly write real and riotous satire. They are themselves too much on the borderlands. They could not be a success as caricaturists for they are already a great success as caricatures.¹

However, Dickens' satire is successful because he is not a caricature. "He was merely a normal man minus a normal self-command."²

In two superb sentences he summed up and swept away the whole British constitution. 'England for the last week has been in an awful state. Lord Coodle would go out, and Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn't come in and there being no people in England to speak of except Coodle and Doodle the country has been without a government.' He lumped all cabinets and all government offices together and made the same game of them all. He created his most staggering humbugs, his most adorable and incredible idiots and set them in the highest throne of our national system. To many moderate and progressive people such a satirist seemed to be insulting Heaven and earth, ready to wreck society for some mad alternative, prepared to pull down St. Paul's and on its ruins erect a gory guillotine.³

Although I have emphasized Chesterton's remarks on Dickens, he finds in many other writers the same kind of simplicity. In fact, certain of his critical comments, penetrating though they are, are so nearly identical for a variety of writers that one is forced, at times, to question their pertinence to the subject. Rather, one takes

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 166.

2 Ibid., p. 99.

3 Ibid., pp. 166-167.

them as light thrown on G. K. Chesterton. Of Meredith, for example, he writes:

The greatness of George Meredith exhibits the same paradox of difficulty as the greatness of Browning: the fact that simplicity was the center while the utmost luxuriance and complexity was the expression....

George Meredith loved straightness, even when he praised it crookedly; he adored innocence even when he analyzed it tortuously. He cared only for unconsciousness, even when he was unduly conscious of it.... That is the mark of the truly great man: that he sees the common man far off and worships him. The great man tries to be ordinary and becomes extraordinary in the process, but the small man tries to be mysterious and becomes lucid in an awful sense--for we can all see through him.¹

In connection with his analysis of Dickens' character, Toots, I pointed out how close, for Chesterton, were simplicity and humility. Toots can perceive the romance of the world because he is simple and humble. Chesterton is able not only to indicate that Browning shares such simplicity, but also to theorize that his unintelligibility has its source in such simplicity.

He was not unintelligible because he was proud, but unintelligible because he was humble. He was not unintelligible because his thoughts were vague, but because to him they were obvious.²

1 Chesterton, "George Meredith," The Uses of Diversity, p. 34.
 2 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 37.

Or again, Chesterton writes, rather recklessly, "The life of Robert Browning...combines the greatest brain with the most simple temperament known in our annals."¹ What Chesterton means the phrase "the greatest brain" to convey to us is difficult to say. At any rate he admits that grotesqueness, unintelligibility is present. He offers as a kind of paradox the theory that the unintelligibility has its source in simplicity.

Appreciation of the grotesque

Here one is faced with the problem of Chesterton's attitude toward the grotesque in art and literature. The first point to be made is that Chesterton himself was attracted by the grotesque. He preferred the rough, the primeval, the mysterious, to the polished, the sophisticated, the lucid. He feels that he is damning Shaw in calling him fastidious.² My emphasis in Chapter One was on Chesterton's key attitudes, which he tells us eventually found synthesis in Christian orthodoxy. Among them was his love of the grotesque. However, as I pointed out, Chesterton was always working toward a synthesis, toward a total philosophy that would give order to his temperamental likes and dislikes. This progression is clearly seen in his

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 3.

2 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 226.

discussion of the grotesque in Alarms and Discursions.

Realism is simply romanticism that has lost its reason. This is so not merely in the sense of insanity but of suicide. It has lost its reason; that is, its reason for existing. The old Greeks summoned god-like things to worship their god. The medieval Christians summoned all things to worship theirs, dwarfs and pelicans, monkeys and madmen. The modern realists summon all these million creatures to worship their god; and then have no god for them to worship. Paganism was in art a pure beauty; that was the dawn. Christianity was a beauty created by controlling a million monsters of ugliness, and that in my belief was the zenith and the noon. Modern art practically means having the million monsters and being unable to control them, and I will venture to call that the disruption and decay.¹

Ultimately Chesterton wanted a disciplined grotesqueness. "Monkeys, madmen, dwarfs and pelicans" must find their place in some order--a Christian order. But what demands emphasis here is that he also liked these grotesque manifestations for their own sake. To do so demands a kind of gusto, which Chesterton had.²

1 Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, p. 6.

2 Here one might call attention to the distinction between the popular, jovial Chesterton and Chesterton the philosopher or contemplative. The former was attractive by virtue of his personality--his gusto, his wit, his apparent eccentricities. McLuhan asserts that the Chesterton who needs to be rescued is Chesterton the contemplative. (H. M. McLuhan, Introduction to Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. xix.) The distinction between joviality and insight is implicit in Chesterton's celebration of the grotesque and his search for its significance.

For Chesterton, it was Christianity alone which in the last analysis found a place for the grotesque, but he is enthusiastic in his praise of those writers who see the need for the grotesque even though they may give no indication of sharing his belief that Christianity gives it meaning. For Chesterton, love of the grotesque is a mark of "energy"¹ and "joy". "The grotesque is the natural expression of joy; and all the Utopias...fail to give a real impression of enjoyment,...because they leave out the grotesque. A man in most modern Utopias cannot really be happy; he is too dignified."² Furthermore, the grotesque is usually found in combination, paradoxically, with a temperament that is simple. Only what is sane, central, ordinary can really perceive and appreciate the grotesque:³ hence, its relationship to the preceding section on simplicity of soul.

Whenever Chesterton refers to great characters of Dickens he is apt to fall back on both the terms: gargoyle and grotesque.

Dickens' sense of democracy was entirely of the other kind; it rested on the other of the two supports of which I have spoken. It rested on the sense that all men were wildly interesting and wildly varied. When

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 149.

2 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 110.

3 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 156.

a Dickens' character becomes excited he becomes more and more himself....as he rises he grows more and more into a gargoyle or grotesque.

...Dickens then had this English feeling of grotesque democracy. By that is more properly meant a vastly varying democracy. The intoxicating variety of men--that was his vision and conception of human brotherhood.¹

Chesterton calls attention to the manner in which the terrifying aspects of the grotesque permeate the whole atmosphere of Oliver Twist. "Even its comic character is almost somber; at least he is too ugly to be merely amusing. Mr. Bumble is in some ways a terrible grotesque."²

He finds in The Old Curiosity Shop an example of that connection between the grotesque and energy to which he had called attention in Robert Browning. "The element of the grotesque in art...means, in the main, energy."³

The comic characters in the book are all like images bought in an old curiosity shop. Quilp might be a gargoyle....The same applies to the sinister...stiffness of Sally Brass. Sampson Brass...is a grotesque. About all this group of bad figures in The Old Curiosity Shop there is...an extraordinary energy.⁴

While Chesterton perceives in Dickens an appreciation of the grotesque, in Browning he finds an even greater zest

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 184-186.

2 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 63.

3 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 149.

4 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 63.

for it. Chesterton admits that there is much truth in the conventional opinion that Browning's use of the grotesque was often a kind of perversity. He calls the "rhyming frenzy of Browning"¹ the "horse-play of literature."² Such lines as the following are dubbed "demented ingenuity:"³

And, whether they pipe us free, from
rats or from mice,
If we've promised them aught, let us
keep our promise.

However, Chesterton, undoubtedly with his own preferences in mind, does not for a moment feel that Browning's grotesqueness is, at all times, merely perversity. He draws a sharp distinction between "demented ingenuity" and what he calls the "serious use of the grotesque."⁴ It should be remembered that Chesterton later defends his own use of grotesque illustration against Mr. McCabe's charge of frivolity. "Whether a man preaches his gospel grotesquely or gravely is merely like the question of whether he preaches it in prose or verse."⁵

Chesterton's defense of Browning's use of the grotesque is very much like his defense of his own use of it. First of all, he asserts that the grotesque is a legitimate form of expression which merely ignores the "standard of classical

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 153.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Chesterton, "Mr. McCabe and A Divine Frivolity," Heretics, p. 153.

art."¹

The element of the grotesque in art
like the element of the grotesque in
nature means, in the main, energy,
the energy which takes its own forms
and goes its own way.²

Secondly, Chesterton asserts that the grotesque may be subordinated to some serious purpose, that it may be used as a medium for the expression of "passion and philosophy."³ He cites the following lines as an example:

Give your first groan-compunction's at work;
And soft! from a Jew you mount to a Turk.
Lo! Micah--the self-same beard on chin,
He was four times already converted in!⁴

It should be noted that while Chesterton asserts that the grotesque may be employed in a "powerful and symbolic"⁵ manner, he is rather vague as to what that means. He asserts that "passion and philosophy" may be expressed through the grotesque, but he does not mention any particular philosophy. The reason for this omission is to be found in the fact that Robert Browning was written in 1902. Orthodoxy appeared in 1908. During the years between those two dates Chesterton had arrived at very definite opinions as to the nature of the philosophy which found a place for the grotesque. In Alarms and Discursions (1910), we find

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 150.

2 Ibid., p. 149.

3 Ibid., p. 153.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Loc. cit.

Chesterton asserting that it was Christianity which was "a beauty created by controlling a million monsters of ugliness."¹ In the grotesque manner of Browning he asserts that Christianity found a place for "dwarfs and pelicans, monkeys and madmen."²

Mystical materialism

I pointed out in Chapter One that Chesterton advocates a mystical materialism. He admires writers who, like Dickens or Cobbett or Browning, see through theories and catchwords to some reality beneath. He asserts that both Dickens and Cobbett would have to do only with "real things."³ But the concept of mystical materialism demands that the writer see not only things, but things as symbols. Chesterton observed that in all the ancient pagan religions mankind had exhibited a mystical materialism.⁴ Men had sensed some kind of connection between the gods and their crops. They built altars; they participated in rituals of sacrifice or thanksgiving.

When Chesterton turns to modern religions he finds that many of them become what he calls merely spiritual religions. He conceives of them as faddist, outside of the stream of the great human traditions. Hence, his mystical

1 Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, p. 6.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 101; William Cobbett, p. 227.

4 Chesterton, "On Modern Paganism," All I Survey, p. 182;
The Everlasting Man, passim.

materialism becomes a controversial weapon.

The truth is that the strange bigotry which leads the Bishop to scream and rail at sacramentalism as magic is in its inmost essence the very reverse of materialism. Indeed it is nothing half so healthy as materialism. The root of this prejudice is not so much a trust in matter as a sort of horror of matter. The man of this philosophy is always asking that worship be wholly spiritual, or even wholly intellectual because he does really feel disgust at the idea of spiritual things having a body and a solid form.¹

This principle finds application in his treatment of literary men. He points out that Meredith, as a religious pagan, had the sacramental idea which is the mark of true religion, "the materialism of the true mystic."

It is the idea that to enter upon abstractions and infinities is to get farther and farther from the mystery; to come nearer some particular stone or flame or boundary is to get nearer and nearer to the mystery. All unsophisticated human beings instinctively accept the sacramental principle that the particular thing is closest to the general, the tangible closest to the spiritual; the child with the doll, the priest with a relic, the girl with an engagement ring, the soldier with a medal, the modern agnostic with a little scarab for luck. One can recall the soul of boyhood better by smelling peppermint than by reading about adolescence...and it is possible for Putney to be a much more pathetic word than Memory.²

1 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 204.

2 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

Mystical materialism implies a sacramental solidity and tangibility, a tangibility which, Chesterton asserts in the preceding quotation, is "closest to the spiritual." Chesterton admires the solidity, the tangibility of the world which Meredith creates in his novels.

Nothing is so fine in Meredith as the satisfying solidity of everything. The wind in which Clara Middleton walked is a real wind; the reader can feel it in his hair. The wine which Dr. Middleton drank is a real wine; the reader can get drunk on it.¹

In religious controversies Chesterton pictures sacramentalism as under attack from a modern sophisticated attitude which looks upon it as close to primitivistic magic.² He defends the unsophisticated view, the idea that the gods may take on human form, as part of the common sense of mankind, as tradition. Just as he thought of himself as a champion of the popular, traditional view in religious controversy, so in literary criticism he pictures Meredith as its unconscious champion. That is, Meredith is seen not as a controversialist, but as one expressing the popular sacramentalism. Henry James, on the contrary, provides the contrast in literature much as Bishop Barnes presented the contrast to popular sacramentalism in his

1 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 204.

religious controversy. For Chesterton, James lacks Meredith's power of communicating real experience; James gives the disembodied spiritual essence of experience:

He is better about ghosts than about gods because of the essential difference between them. A ghost is a disembodied spirit, a god must always be an incarnate spirit. Admirable as are Mr. James' drawing room dialogues I always have an uneasy sense that they are dialogues with the dead. Not because they are untrue; rather because they are too true for life: the souls stand naked.¹

For Chesterton, Blake, like Meredith, is the enemy of that "emasculate mysticism"² of the type that he sees in James. There exists for him a close, even though unstated parallel between Blake and Meredith. What he says of Blake's "healthier, heathen mysticism which did not shrink from the shapes of things, from the emphatic colours of existence"³ is certainly close to Meredith's mystical materialism. It is an important link because it indicates that Chesterton conceived of both as avoiding what he considered to be the pitfall of Oriental mysticism which tends to dissolve everything in God.

It was the mark of the old Eastern initiation, and it is still the mark of the grades and plains of our theological thinkers, that as man climbs

1 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

2 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 209.

3 Ibid., p. 208.

higher and higher God becomes to him
more and more formless, ethereal and
even thin.¹

Chesterton asserts that Blake's mysticism, unlike that of the Eastern thinkers, is indicative of a "rooted spirituality."² Furthermore, Chesterton finds that lack of understanding of this combination of mysticism and materialism is at the root of much of the misunderstanding of Blake's poetry. He observes that the modern man, when he reads the last two lines of the following quotation, "will ...come...to the conclusion that William Blake was mad."³

God appears and God is light
To those poor souls that dwell in night.
But does a human form display
To those that dwell in realms of day.

Chesterton contends that "those last two lines express all that is best in Blake and all that is best in all the tradition of the mystics."⁴ He finds the lines to be indicative of the materialistic solidity of Blake's mysticism. "God for him was...more solid as one came near....God is merely light to the merely unenlightened. God is a man to the enlightened."⁵

Love for the populace

Love of the people, the average man, what today are called the masses, Chesterton saw as an essential attitude

1 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 209.

2 Ibid., p. 142.

3 Ibid., p. 147.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Ibid., p. 148.

of the poet. He notes that the poet in practice often did not share popular feelings, that he fell into the error of the fin de siècle writers by praising the rare and exotic.

The ego was the all; and the praise of it was enunciated in madder and madder rhythms by poets whose Helicon was absinthe and whose Pegasus was the nightmare.¹

But he felt that ideally "poets are those who share these popular sentiments:"

Poets draw out the shy refinement of the rabble....The Poets carry the popular sentiments to a keener and more splendid pitch; but let it always be remembered that it is the popular sentiments that they are carrying. No man ever wrote any good poetry to show that childhood was shocking or that twilight was gay and farcical, or that a man was contemptible because he had crossed his single sword with three.

The Poets are those who rise above the people by understanding them. Of course, most of the Poets wrote in prose--Rabelais, for instance, and Dickens. The Prigs rise above the people by refusing to understand them; by saying that all their dim, strange preferences are prejudices and superstitions.²

Chesterton himself shared this love of people in all their variety and energy. In his youth he had written an invitation:

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 85.

2 Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 149-150.

Mr. Gilbert Chesterton
requests the pleasure
of humanity's company
to tea on Dec. 25th, 1896.

Humanity, Esq., the Earth, Cosmos E.¹

It should also be noted that the love of humanity, the Whitmanesque spirit, voiced in The Wild Knight did not diminish as Chesterton grew older. He points out that the emotion or mood had been shaped and substantiated for him by the Christian creed.² In other words, the emotion had become strengthened by virtue of its being intellectualized.

Chesterton's real affection for people influenced his literary criticism. Among the reasons for his condemnation of the aesthetes is their detachment from the vulgar mob.³ Kipling, whom one might think Chesterton would admire for his portraits of varied humanity, is condemned because of his "globe-trotting," which, thinks Chesterton, blinds him to "the things that unite men--hunger and babies, and the beauty of women, and the promise or menace of the sky."⁴

Because Chesterton was democratic (here I am using the word as one descriptive of his regard for the sentiments of ordinary men) rather than republican, his comments on the literature of the enlightenment are usually restrained. True, he calls Pope "the last great poet of

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 61.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 17.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 85.

4 Chesterton, "On Mr. Rudyard Kipling," Heretics, p. 50.

civilization;"¹ but the austere republican spirit of the enlightenment Chesterton regards as a consistent spirit that is manifest in Plato,² in Milton,³ in William Watson⁴ and in Shaw.⁵ In its coldness toward unlettered humanity it is hardly a Chestertonian view of the world.

In Browning and Dickens, however, Chesterton finds the ideal poet's love of humanity.

The same general fact will be found through the whole of Browning's life and critical attitude. He adored Shelley, and also Carlyle, who sneered at him. He delighted in Mill, and also in Ruskin, who rebelled against Mill. He excused Napoleon III and also Landor, who hurled interminable curses against Napoleon. He admired all the cycle of great men who all contemned each other. To say he had no streak of envy in his nature would be true, but unfair; for there is no justification for attributing any of these great men's opinions to him. But Browning was really unique in that he had a certain spontaneous and unthinking tendency to the admiration of others.⁶

In another passage Chesterton, desiring to emphasize that Browning's affection was not just for humanity but for persons, finds something repulsive in the former word:

To Browning, probably the beginning and end of all optimism, was to be found in the faces in the street. To him they were all

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- 1 Chesterton, "Pope and the Art of Satire," Varied Types, p. 47.
 2 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 142.
 3 Chesterton, "Milton and His Age," The Living Age, 264:556-62, February 26, 1910.
 4 Chesterton, "The Political Poetry of William Watson," The Fortnightly, 80:761-68, November, 1902.
 5 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 201.
 6 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 56.

masks of a deity, the heads of a hundred-headed Indian god of nature....He was hungrily interested in all human things, but it would have been quite impossible to have said of him that he loved humanity. He did not love humanity but men.... Browning believed that to every man that ever lived upon this earth had been given a definite and peculiar confidence of God.¹

Chesterton finds that Dickens, to an even greater extent than Browning, voices the spirit of the populace:

If he had not his place with Fielding and Thackeray, he would still have his place with Wat Tyler and Wilkes; for the man led a mob. He did what no English statesman, perhaps, has really done; he called out the people.²

Chesterton continues by asserting that Dickens "expressed...the things close to the common mind."³ Here, I think, Chesterton is carried away by an exuberant desire to explain what "common mind" really means. He notes that it does not mean the mind of the "mere mob."⁴ (This is unlike Chesterton. In the preceding pages he had praised Dickens because he "led a mob)."⁵ On the contrary, "it means the mind of all the artists and heroes; or else it would not be common. Plato had the common mind; Dante had the common mind; or that mind was not common."⁶

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 187.

2 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 79.

3 Ibid., p. 85.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Ibid., p. 79.

6 Ibid., p. 85.

It is safe to say that it remains a debatable point whether Dickens had a "common mind" in that precise and correct sense in which Chesterton is using the term. At any rate it is more characteristic of Chesterton to picture Dickens not so much as a writer who appeals to all men but as a writer who, because he champions a particular group, the poor or the populace, is strongly antagonistic towards certain men and ideas.

Chesterton himself wrote best when he had some enemy to fight. In his own novels and essays he combats many of the same evils that he finds are Dickens' targets. In The Flying Inn, the satire is directed at reformers whose reforms will amount to depriving the average Englishman of his right to a glass of ale in his local tavern. Hence, the inn becomes a "flying inn." Chesterton is protesting against a tyranny, a loss of liberty. He is defending the populace against the invasions of sociologists and philanthropists.¹

In "Slum Novelists and the Slums," Chesterton is protesting against the tendency of "modern novels"² to indulge in "artistic slumming."³ His point is that these novels are written by middle and upper-class men; hence, they "are

1 Chesterton, The Flying Inn, passim.

2 Chesterton, "Slum Novelists and the Slums," Heretics, p. 278.

3 Ibid., p. 277.

not a description of the state of the slums." They describe the "state of the slummers."¹ Chesterton is protesting against the tendency on the part of these writers to lose sight of the individuality of the members of the populace, to portray a dingy uniformity.

Chesterton's praise of Dickens should be seen in the light of these ideas. He finds Dickens sharing this desire to fight a positive evil. He calls Dickens a "Poet." He further defines poets as people who "carry the popular sentiments to a keener and more splendid pitch."² Hence, it follows that Dickens will not have the objective attitude of the "slum novelists." Chesterton, logically enough, identifies Dickens with the people. "Dickens wanted what the people wanted."³

He presents the spectacle of Dickens, "the populace," and, it might be added, himself, in a furiously indignant onslaught against "modern things."⁴ Chesterton writes: "Dickens had sympathy with the poor in the Greek and literal sense; he suffered with them mentally; for the things that irritated them were the things that irritated him."⁵ The statement would be just as accurate if it were altered

1 Chesterton, "Slum Novelists and the Slums," Heretics, p. 281.

2 Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," Alarms and Discursions, p. 149.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 64.

4 Ibid., p. 133.

5 Loc. cit.

to read: "[Chesterton] had sympathy with [Dickens] in the Greek and literal sense. He suffered with [Dickens] mentally."

The following passage is an excellent example of the way in which Chesterton finds Dickens' love for the populace asserting itself through indignation:

The things the poor hate are the modern things, the rationalistic things--doctors, inspectors, poor law guardians, professional philanthropy....Of all this anger, good or bad, Dickens is the voice of an accusing energy. When, in "The Christmas Carol," Scrooge refers to the surplus population, the Spirit tells him, very justly, not to speak until he knows what the surplus is and where it is....When a group of superciliously benevolent economists look down into the abyss of the surplus population, assuredly there is only one answer that should be given to them; and that is to say, "If there is a surplus, you are a surplus...." If the...poor became masters, I think the priests would escape, I fear the gentlemen would; but I believe the gutters would be simply running with the blood of philanthropists.¹

That spirit, which prompted Chesterton to object to the detached attitude of the "slum novelists" stands him in good stead when he is faced with the problem--or the joy--of dealing with the great Dickens' characters. Chesterton objected to the sweeping despair of those novelists who reduced the populace to a kind of gray lump.² But at the

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 183-184.

2 Chesterton, "Slum Novelists and the Slums," Heretics, p. 281.

same time he was suspicious of a sweeping love of humanity. "It is a great mistake to suppose that love unites and unifies men. Love diversifies them because love is directed toward individuality."¹

The gusto and relish with which Chesterton approaches the great characters of Dickens is based on his sympathy with the attitude of their creator. In such Dickens' characters as Susan Nipper, Mr. Guppy, Mrs. Gamp, Uncle Pumblechook, Micawber, Swiveller, Crummles, and Toots, Chesterton finds concrete expression of his belief that real individuality, "reeking personality,"² is to be found among members of the populace. "For the glory of this world is a very small and priggish affair."³

The sense of limits

Chesterton conceived of the love of limits as one of the marks of the poetic mind. Again, a tendency toward the impressionistic, the breaking down of the firm line, current in his youth, he saw as a reversion toward the unhealthy view of the East. I pointed out how, in The Flying Inn, the character Lord Ivywood wants to see all boundaries removed, how Dorian Wimpole answers him by observing that he will never be a poet. Chesterton writes:

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 186-187.

2 Ibid., p. 191.

3 Ibid., p. 190.

Both the western and the eastern mystic may be called children, but the eastern child treads the sand castle back into the sand, and enjoys seeing the silver snow melt back into muddy water.¹

The idea of the significance of limits loomed large in Chesterton's mind. In his autobiography he refers to the concept of limits as one of his guiding principles.²

In Chesterton's literary criticism this idea is employed as a means of penetrating into the subconscious mind of the writer--particularly of Stevenson. In his introduction to Robert Louis Stevenson he announces that he is "to attempt the conjectural description of certain states of mind with the books that were the external expression of them."³ Now this book is of particular interest in that it clearly divulges Chesterton's method of tracing a conjectural correlation between his own experience and that of his subject.

The correlation Chesterton finds is varied. He speaks of Stevenson's escape to the nursery. In his own autobiography he asserts that the glimpses of truth he had in childhood provided a significant experience, that in comparison to it much of his later experience seemed illusory and unreal. These glimpses of truth he associates with the toy

1 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 203.

2 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 25-26.

3 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 26.

theatre of his childhood; he finds that the toy theatre had a comparable significance for Stevenson.¹

The essence of the toy theatre is that it presents reality with angularity and sharpness. It cannot be subtle. It is a very obvious, limited sort of medium: its forms are fixed. Its significance appears when Chesterton attempts his "conjectural description." At the risk of an Irish bull, Chesterton asserts that Stevenson reacted from the vagueness and pessimism of the late nineteenth century before these were in full bloom. He found his true work to shape in sharp, cutting prose characters whose very existence is a denial of all the fin de siècle weariness.²

The love of limits, and the love of the toy theatre-- it is around these two ideas that Chesterton's study of Stevenson revolves. And both of these loomed large in Chesterton's own experience.

In attempting to fathom the quality which is the essence of Stevenson, Chesterton seems almost to exhaust his vocabulary in his search for words and phrases to express the quality of sharpness and limits that he associates with him. Some of these are: "love of sharp edges,"³

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 26-27; Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 20.

2 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 57.

3 Ibid., p. 47.

"cutting or piercing action,"¹ "thrust,"² "appetite for cutting it clean,"³ "angular,"⁴ "crossed swords,"⁵ "steely cold,"⁶ "quick silver,"⁷ "vivid,"⁸ "arrow,"⁹ "bony,"¹⁰ "brittle,"¹¹ "flat,"¹² "pinked with a rapier,"¹³ "lean, wiry, taut, and alert."¹⁴

Sister Mary Paul Fisch has observed that Chesterton's comments on Poe, appearing in his study of Stevenson, seem to her unfair.¹⁵ I think, rather, that they are to be understood not as any personal attack but rather as one glimpse of Chesterton engaging in part of a large scale attack on heresy. But first they need to be understood as the negation of his appreciative criticism of Stevenson. To communicate his concept of Stevenson as one who bears witness to the principle of limits, he introduces Poe's mood as a significant contrast and clarification. For Chesterton, Poe represents, not sharp edges and limits, but decay and

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 47.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Ibid., p. 48.

4 Ibid., p. 152, p. 185.

5 Ibid., p. 52, p. 154.

6 Ibid., p. 46.

7 Ibid., p. 119.

8 Ibid., p. 46.

9 Ibid., p. 182.

10 Ibid., p. 185.

11 Loc. cit.

12 Ibid., p. 194.

13 Ibid., p. 154.

14 Chesterton, "On R. L. S.," Generally Speaking, p. 240.

15 Sister Mary Paul Fisch, G. K. Chesterton as Literary Critic, p. 71.

decomposition, liquefaction--the breaking down of forms.¹

The point of Poe is that we feel that everything is decaying, including ourselves; faces are already growing featureless like those of lepers; roof-trees are rotting from root to roof; one great gray fungus as vast as a forest is sucking up life rather than giving it forth; mirrored in stagnant pools like lakes of poison which yet fade without line or frontier into the swamp. The stars are not clean in his sight; but are rather more worlds made for worms...That is the atmosphere of Edgar Allen Poe; a sort of rich rottenness of decomposition, with something thick and narcotic in the very air.²

I suggested that there are overtones in the Poe-Stevenson contrast which extend beyond the boundaries of literary criticism. I do not think that it is reading anything into Chesterton to find here the familiar East-West contrast. Poe's tendency to liquefy, to melt down forms, recalls the comparison made in William Blake between the Eastern and Western mystic. The former "treads the sand castle back into the sand, and enjoys seeing the silver snow melt back into muddy water."³

Christianity, however, Chesterton finds symbolized by something much clearer, something unmistakable, the Cross, the crux.⁴ Christianity is as sharp and unmistakable in

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 40.

Chesterton seems to overlook the rationalistic Poe, the Poe of "The Goldbug" and "The Purloined Letter."

Obviously, the contrast is not as clear cut as he makes it.

2 Ibid., pp. 40-41.

3 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 203.

4 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 50; Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 241.

its message as Stevenson is in his characters and imagery. In Orthodoxy Chesterton had spoken of his dislike for "infernally parallels."¹ He likes things that come to a point, "swords, for instance."² He found in the sword a typical Western Christian form. His story, "The Wrong Shape," clarifies this idea. There Father Brown solves a mystery because he is aware that certain spiritual concepts find material embodiment. The wrong shape is a crooked knife. "'Why, look at it,' cried Father Brown, holding out the crooked knife at arm's length as if it were some glittering snake, 'don't you see, it is the wrong shape? Don't you see that it has no hearty and plain purpose? It does not point like a spear, it does not sweep like a scythe, it does not look like a weapon. It looks like an instrument of torture.'"³

Chesterton's appreciation of Stevenson as one aware of the value of limits centers upon the latter's sharply etched style. He finds the same "appetite for cutting it clean"⁴ apparent in Stevenson's approach to his characters.

There is no Celtic twilight about his
Celts. Alan Breck Stewart has no yearning
for any delicate vapor to veil his
bright silver buttons or his bright blue

1. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 113.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, "The Wrong Shape," The Father Brown Omnibus, p. 122.

4 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 48.

French coat.¹

When Stevenson set about to describe Villon and his gang of ragamuffins...he carved... his story as beautifully as a French balladeHe was...deliberate; he was thrifty; he thoroughly deserved the dignified title of a working man.²

A different application of the same principle of limits may be discerned in Chesterton's study of Blake. Chesterton is faced with the problem of doing justice to Blake both as poet and as artist. Here, Chesterton's own experience stood him in good stead. He had been a student at the Slade School of Art before settling on journalism as a career. In 1902 he had published his study of the painter Watts.

His comments on Blake's art parallel his comments on Stevenson's characters in two ways. In both the characters and the art he sees the operation of the principle of firmness, clarity, sharp limits. In both the characters and the art he finds, paradoxically, a rebellion against something that was yet to be fully expressed. That is, Stevenson's characters are a living denial of the pessimism of the Nineties;³ Blake's art rebels against the vagueness of the Impressionism of the same period.

1 Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 44.

2 Ibid., p. 201.

3 Ibid., p. 230.

No one can understand Blake's pictures, no one can understand a hundred illusions in his epigrams, satires and art criticism who does not first of all realize that William Blake was a fanatic on the subject of the firm line. The thing he loved most in art was that lucidity and decision of outline which can be seen best in the cartoons of Raphael, in the Elgin marbles, and in the simpler designs of Michelangelo. The thing he hated most in art was the thing which we now call Impressionism--the substitution of atmosphere for shape, the sacrifice of form to tint, the cloud land of the mere colorist....

He was the sharpest satirist of the Impressionists who ever wrote, only he satirized the Impressionists before they were born.¹

Chesterton finds that the poetic mind is not one in revolt against conventions. His defense of convention is an aspect of his insight that the poetic mind observes the need for limits. The joy of things, noted Chesterton in Orthodoxy, is preserved within a framework or limit.

"Christianity is the only frame which has preserved the pleasures of Paganism."² Hence Chesterton writes:

Cockney artists profess to find the bourgeoisie dull; as if artists had any business to find anything dull. Decadents talk contemptuously of its conventions and its set tasks; it never occurs to them that conventions and set tasks are the very way to keep that

1 Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 18-21.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 260.

greenness in the grass and that redness
in the rose--which they have lost for-
ever.¹

This principle of the defense of convention is one based on Chesterton's concept of the poetic mind as one aware of "the pathos...of human limitations."² However, the poet and convention forms a subordinate subject in itself.

In The Man who was Thursday there appears a chapter called "The Two Poets of Saffron Park." One of the poets is Lucian Gregory, the poet of anarchy. The other is Gabriel Syme, the poet of law, order, convention. Syme, in other words, becomes the mouthpiece for the expression of certain of Chesterton's paradoxes concerning the nature of art and morality. To Gregory, Syme, as a "poet of law," is a "contradiction in terms. An artist disregards all governments, abolishes all conventions. The poet delights in disorder only."³ Syme's answers are a defense of the idea of limits and conventions. His ideas are identical with those expressed by Gabriel Gale, in "The Fantastic Friends." Not anarchy, but order, limit, rule, convention are poetical.⁴

The positive or appreciative criticism which is based on Chesterton's insight into this matter of the poetry in

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 77.

2 Chesterton, The Flying Inn, p. 255.

3 Chesterton, The Man who was Thursday, p. 6.

4 Chesterton, "The Fantastic Friends," The Poet and the Lunatics, pp. 3-33.

convention concentrates on Browning. However, his comments on Blake and Whitman throw light on the subject. While he finds much to admire in both, he is consistent in calling unpoetic much of the revolt which they share--revolt which has conventionally been assumed to add to their poetic stature. He finds their anarchy not exciting, but dull.

Take, for example, his notion of going naked. Here I think Blake is merely a sort of hard theorist. Here, in spite of his imagination and laughter, there was even a touch of the prig about him. He was obscene on principle. So to a great extent was Walt Whitman....There was something of this pedantic perfection in Blake's escapades. As the hygienist insists on wearing Jagger clothes, he insists on wearing no clothes. As the esthete must wear sandals, he must wear nothing. He is not really lawless at all. He is bowing to the law of his own outlawed logic.

There is nothing at all poetical in this revolt. William Blake was a great and real poet, but at this point he was merely unpoetical. Walt Whitman was a great and real poet, but on this point he was prosaic and priggish. Two extraordinary men are not poets because they tear the veil away from sex. On the contrary, it is because all men are poets that they all hang a veil over sex. The ploughman does not plow by night, because he does not feel specially romantic about plowing. He does love by night because he does feel specially romantic about sex. In this matter Blake is not only unpoetical, but far less poetical than the mass of ordinary men. Decorum is not tame, decorum is wild, as wild as the wind at night.¹

¹ Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 174-177.

Two points should be noticed about the preceding passage. First, Chesterton delights in observing that those who think themselves anarchical fall into a pattern of revolt which is much more crippling than the convention against which they have revolted. He notes that agnosticism was once a revolt against formal religion, but that it became "an established thing. We might almost say that agnosticism was an established church."¹ It is possible that this idea that unconventionality often becomes a hard convention is now to be classed among commonplaces. But Chesterton's illustrations of it are always fresh and unexpected. Secondly, in the preceding passage Chesterton appears to be using the word "decorum" as a substitute for the word "convention." He defines convention in the following manner:

So far from suggesting anything stale or sober, the word convention rather conveys a hubbub; it is the coming together of men; every mob is a convention. In its secondary sense it means the common soul of such a crowd, its instinctive anger at the traitor or its instinctive salutation of the flag. Conventions may be cruel, they may be unsuitable, they may even be be grossly superstitious or obscene; but there is one thing that they never are. Conventions are never dead. They are always full of accumulated emotions, the

¹ Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 143.

piled-up and passionate experiences of many generations asserting what they could not explain.¹

Now it is because Blake and Whitman revolt against that convention which goes by the name of decorum that Chesterton finds them unpoetic. They have lost contact with the people. In the terminology of his essay, "The Three Kinds of Men," they are no longer poets expressing the popular mind. They are "Prigs:"

The Prigs rise above the people by refusing to understand them; by saying that all their dim, strange preferences are prejudices and superstitions, the Prigs make the people feel stupid.²

In short, Chesterton finds a certain amount of priggishness in both Blake and Whitman because, in their attitude toward sex and nakedness, they have lost sight of one of the "dim, strange preferences" of the people.

Much of what Chesterton says about Browning is autobiographical.³ Browning is employed as an object to be hurled at the aesthetes and decadent pessimists of the Nineties. However, Chesterton in doing this does not wrench the truth but throws valuable light on Browning's nature. What Chesterton objected to in the literature of

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 178.

2 Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 149-150.

3 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 95.

the fin de siècle was unconventionality in art and morals. In approaching Browning his aim is first to show that Browning was in revolt against neither; secondly that such conventionality contributed to the value of his poetry.

Chesterton emphasizes, does not minimize, Browning's middle-class origins. There he finds the source of Browning's dislike of the lawless and unconventional.

He pictured all the passions of the earth since the Fall, from the devouring amorousness of "Time's Revenge" to the despotic fantasy of "Instans Tyrannus"; but he remained himself an Englishman of the middle class. The moment that he came in contact with anything that was slovenly, anything that was lawless, in actual life, something rose up in him, older than any opinions, the blood of generations of good men. He met George Sand and her poetical circle and hated it, with all the hatred of an old city merchant for the irresponsible life. He met the Spiritualists and hated them, with all the hatred of the middle class for borderlands and equivocal positions and playing with fire. His intellect went upon bewildering voyages but his soul walked in a straight road.¹

He emphasizes Browning's conventionality in matters of conduct:

Unfortunately, however, they are the very people who cannot, as a general rule, see that a poet is also bound to be conventional in matters of conduct. It is only the smaller poet who sees the poetry of revolt, of isolation, of disagreement; the larger

¹ Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 9.

poet sees the poetry of those great agreements which constitute the romantic achievement of civilization....Browning had, it must thoroughly be realized, a real pleasure in these great agreements, these great conventions.¹

Chesterton expresses a similar idea more vigorously in one of his periodical articles. Among the many ideas which he observed drifting about in a rather inchoate form and which he attacked for both their vagueness and their inadequacy, was the idea that society should "offer special moral liberties to geniuses." He asserted that to do so "means offering special moral liberties to idiots," since "the silly artists are probably more numerous than the wise ones." He goes on to say that

Byron and Shelley may have professed to be polygamous because they were poetical. As they were men with brains I think it... more probable that they professed to be polygamous because they liked it. But the paltriest little egotist that ever played the ape to Swinburne will claim as proper to a poet all the insanities and infamies which Byron (to do him justice) only claimed as proper to a gentleman.²

Unfortunately, when Chesterton wants to indicate that Browning, in addition to being conventional in matters of conduct, was also conventional in matters of art, he does

1 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 99.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 140:464, March 30, 1912.

so; but in order to do so he has to expand his definition of conventional to such an extent that a basis for calling any poet unconventional no longer exists. Chesterton is argumentative; but in the following passage he is undermining the support for his argument:

And in precisely the same fashion a poet must, by the nature of things be conventional.....

Poetry deals with primal and conventional things--the hunger for bread, the love of women, the love of children, the desire for immortal life....If....a man did not feel a bitter craving to eat bread; but did...feel a fresh, original craving to eat brass fenders...poetry could not express him. If a man, instead of falling in love with a woman, fell in love with a fossil...poetry could not express him. Poetry can only express what is original in one sense--the sense in which we speak of original sin. It is original, not in the paltry sense of being new, but in the deeper sense of being old; it is original in the sense that it deals with origins.¹

¹ Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 99.

CHAPTER THREE

HERETICS

I, for one, confess that I am only slightly interested in literature as such.¹

I wish to deal with my most distinguished contemporaries, not personally or in a merely literary manner, but in relation to the real body of doctrine which they teach.²

Chesterton's approach to literature is comparable to the approach taken by Irving Babbitt, the humanist. Babbitt usually sees a literary figure or his literary production not as a whole, but as representative of some aspect of classicism or romanticism. In short, the criticism is one-sided: it isolates a particular aspect of the writer's work, the idea, the philosophy behind it. Although he can and does engage in the full appreciation, the rounded estimate, Chesterton, like Babbitt, tends to isolate ideas. However, unlike Babbitt's, his view is Christian rather than humanistic.

In this chapter I shall be concerned chiefly with pointing out the nature of the various heresies which Chesterton finds in the works of literary men. The term "here-

1 Chesterton, "The Fallacy of the Young Nation," Heretics, pp. 260-261.

2 "Introductory Remarks," Ibid., p. 22.

sies" needs some explanation. In his volume called Heretics he announces that he is going to deal with the various doctrines of writers who have the "hardihood"¹ to disagree with him. These writers he calls heretics. Now although Chesterton does not invariably employ the term "heretics" he consistently uses the method found in the volume of that name. Since he was mainly the philosopher, the contemplative, he enters into the spirit of only a few writers, Dickens, Browning, Stevenson, Chaucer, most notably. With most others he is content to be more detached. He observes the underlying idea, then condemns it in the light of the Christian philosophy.

It might be objected at this point that no critic can really judge a writer from the standpoint of Christian philosophy because of the impossibility of any one critic's seeing Christianity steadily and whole. The objection is to a certain extent legitimate. What we often get is Chestertonian Christianity, that vigorous and joyous affirmation to be associated with his name. For that reason there will be some inevitable overlapping with Chapter Two. It would be impossible to compartmentalize rigidly. Chesterton moves towards orthodoxy, a total philosophy which

1 Chesterton, "Introductory Remarks," Heretics, p. 22.

was not invented by him, a Christian synthesis; yet at the same time he does lay emphasis on the ideas within that synthesis that appeal most strongly to him as a person. The emphasis, however, in this chapter, is on Chesterton the dogmatic philosopher.

In Avowals and Denials, Chesterton discusses the danger of the reaction into a mood of pacifism that settled over much of Europe after the first World War.

Now to begin with, I deeply distrust the mood because it was a mood....Peace... must be founded on some theory of things; on...some philosophy of the nature of the nations and the true international ideal.¹

The point, then, which Chesterton emphasizes is that the reaction was a mood. The distinction between a mood and a conviction, between a mood and a total philosophy, is pertinent to this chapter. Chesterton constantly attacked moods from the vantage point of a total Christian philosophy. "Heresy...always sets the mood against the mind."²

Determinism

I deal first with Chesterton's attacks on the mood or heresy of determinism. Chesterton never asserted flatly that he considered determinism to be the most dangerous of

1 Chesterton, "On the Great Relapse," Avowals and Denials, pp. 226-228.

2 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 179.

heresies. However, the liberty which determinism denies he called "the noblest of all things."¹

Chesterton's attacks on determinism as reflected in literature are part of a large scale attack of that belief. The following passage is from a series of radio talks given from 1932 to 1936, the year of his death.

And third, we forget that there is no faith in freedom without faith in free will. A servile fatalism dogs the creed of materialism; because nothing, as Dante said, less than the generosity of God could give to Man, after all ordinary orderly gifts, the noblest of all things, which is Liberty.²

Some thirty years earlier he had asserted that civilization itself is merely one of the things we choose to have and that it is impossible where servile fatalism has taken root.

The sociologist tells us that all sorts of things under certain conditions must happen; and all because some particular economic or material fact must happen.... Their evolution will go on exactly until our revolution chooses to begin.³

The same argument is prominent in his defense of Christian orthodoxy in the volume of that name. "The determinist... makes nonsense of the human sense of actual choice."⁴

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 643.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 128:490, October 7, 1905.

4 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 64-65.

"Literature lives by history. Otherwise it exists: like trigonometry,"¹ said Chesterton. Since Chesterton rarely gave evidence of interest in the mere existence of literature it was inevitable that he would see it in the light of the ideas of the age from which it sprang. Hence, in attacking the various manifestations of determinism in literature he draws his examples largely from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Among late nineteenth century writers Chesterton points to Ibsen and Zola as popularizers of this slavish view. He asserts that notions about heredity popularized by them strike him as "not merely evil, but as essentially ignorant and retrogressive....Determinism is simply the primal twilight of all mankind."²

Chesterton's remarks on Shelley are of interest in that they are typical of the former's method. So intent is he on attacking a fatalistic heresy, so intent on having the reader observe the heresy, understand it, and share his view in regard to it, that the person--here Shelley--who prompted the discussion is apparently forgotten by the critic and is perhaps meant to be forgotten by the reader. In reference to the closing lines of Shelley's Hellas he writes:

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 638.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 129:150, August 4, 1906.

It is surely obvious that Shelley, in the rise and fall of those remarkable lines of the Hellas chorus is referring to the old Pagan conception of the Great Year. He feels that it justifies him in saying that the world's great age will begin anew and the golden years return. But he does not want to drain the urn of prophecy to the dregs, because the same wheel of fate that has brought the golden years will bring round also the leaden years and the iron years; and we shall all be forced to repeat all the crimes and tyrannies of history. Without being unduly controversial I think I may say that it is not a cheery prospect. And I am exceedingly proud to observe that it was before the coming of Christianity that it flourished, and after the neglect of Christianity that it returned.¹

Judging by the same standard, Chesterton finds in Macbeth no trace of the "old Pagan conception."

I...think that the greatest drama in the world is Macbeth. I think Macbeth is the one supreme drama because it is the one Christian drama....But I mean by Christian ...the strong sense of spiritual liberty and sin; the idea that the best man can be as bad as he chooses. You may call Othello a victim of chance....You cannot call Macbeth anything but a victim of Macbeth. The evil spirits tempt him, but they never force him: they never even frighten him, for he is a very brave man.²

1 Chesterton, "On the Later Portion of Poems," All is Grist, p. 123.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 140:312, March 2, 1912. Chesterton calls Macbeth Christian drama. On the other hand he finds the use of a phrase such as "proletarian drama" absurd. "Imagine having to apply that principle, let us say, to 'Charley's Aunt!'" (Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, p. 46). Bolshevism he calls a heresy, a mood too narrow to include the laughter of "Charley's Aunt" within its boundaries. One of the appeals of Christianity is that it does leave room for the laughter that he loved: "The meaning of Aquinas is that medievalism was always seeking a centre of gravity. The meaning of Chaucer is that, when found, it was always a centre of gaiety." (Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 273.)

It should be emphasized that the freedom Chesterton desires and seeks is the freedom offered within the Christian framework. In short, the desire for liberty may itself be merely a mood. Indeed, in connection with this idea it should be pointed out that the wonder which Chesterton celebrates might, he felt, be perverted to the wrong ends were it not to find some home within the Christian framework. He points out that a tyrant observing the generalization that humanity ought to feel wonder at even a blade of grass, ought to feel thankful for it, might say: "Let them eat grass." An idea of this nature must be supplemented by other ideas. Christianity, he felt, offered the other ideas.¹

To return to the idea of fatalism versus free will, Chesterton points out that a movement which began, roughly, with Shelley and which ended with Swinburne "set the laurel crown of the bard directly against the golden crown of all other kings and conceived the lyre as chiefly strung to sound the praises of Liberty."² He notes that the reaction to this mood has become, in Aldous Huxley, something very close to the Calvinistic mood of total depravity, the "dismal wine of Puritan determinism."³ "There are moments when

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 351.

2 Chesterton, "The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 195.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 145.

he [Aldous Huxley] seems to drift darkly toward that Calvinist exaggeration called Total Depravity."¹ Chesterton feels that what had begun as a bright enthusiasm had ended in something close to despair. As regards that despair, he asserts:

Nor will man be permanently satisfied with the pessimism of Huxley any more than with the optimism of Whitman. For man knows that there is that within him which can never be valued too highly, as well as that within him which can never be hated too much; and only a philosophy which emphasizes both, violently and simultaneously, can restore the balance to the brain.²

For Chesterton, then, determinism is a mood. Yet it is understandable as a reaction. But only Christian orthodoxy, he feels, can prevent moods, even good moods, from evaporating, from giving way to some reactionary force. Pessimistic "Total Depravity" does not satisfy. But, on the other hand, optimism, by itself, does not satisfy. Nowhere does Chesterton make this point clearer than when he asserts that his own youthful faith in the equality and divinity of all men, a faith which he shared with Whitman, had not disappeared, though he points out that in Mencken it had.

It remains real for me, not by any merit of mine, but by the fact that this mystical

1 Chesterton, "The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 197.

2 Ibid., p. 201.

idea, while it has evaporated as a mood, still exists as a creed. I am perfectly prepared to assert, as firmly as I should have asserted in my boyhood, that the hump-backed and half-witted Negro is decorated with a nimbus of gold-coloured light.¹

Naturalism

Another of the heresies which Chesterton attacks is naturalism. It is inevitable that Chesterton, writing from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, would oppose various manifestations of naturalism in literature. However, his attack on naturalism is not as uncompromising as is his attack on determinism. It must not be forgotten that Chesterton was early an apostle of Whitman and that the poems in the collection called The Wild Knight, published in 1905 and written at an earlier date, praise the goodness of nature. Priests and kings, representatives of convention and order, occupy a place similar to that assigned them by Swinburne.

Furthermore, Chesterton never at any time succumbs to a sterile rejection of nature. To do so would, he felt, be to fall into the pessimistic heresy of the Manichees, "which traced the roots of evil to nature herself."² In other words, to conceive of Nature as an evil force working

1 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 17.

2 Chesterton, "The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Side-lights on New London and Newer York, p. 200.

against the spiritual in man would be to fall into a pessimism which, in itself, is one of the heresies which Chesterton attacks.

A scrutiny of Chesterton's remarks on Christianity as they appear in his study of William Blake clearly indicates that there is nothing barren or sterile in his attitude toward nature. There he points out that each of us is the heir of three traditions. In his words: "Each of us today is three men." We have inherited the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of pagan Rome. The third man, says Chesterton, "is the origins--he is the man in the forest."¹ In short, he is the man who lives next to nature, whose god is nature. Chesterton is of the opinion that Christianity combined the two other traditions. It introduced into the Roman order the vitality of Pan.

The pagans of the real Roman Empire were nothing if not respectable. It is said that when Christ was born the cry went through the world that Pan was dead. The truth is that when Christ was born Pan for the first time began to stir in his grave. The pagan gods had become pure fables when Christianity gave them a new lease of life as devils.²

Christianity, then, gave order to the old vitality. Two years earlier, in Orthodoxy, Chesterton had expressed

¹ Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 106-107.

² Ibid., p. 107.

a similar idea concerning the relationship between Christianity and naturalism. There, in his remarks on the extent to which nature can be trusted, he is more explicit in his enunciation of material that will later enter into his literary criticism:

About the time when the Stoic idealism had begun to show the weaknesses of pessimism, the old nature worship of the ancients had begun to show the enormous weaknesses of optimism. Nature worship is natural enough while the society is young, or, in other words Pantheism is all right when it is the worship of Pan. But Nature has another side which experience and sin are not slow in finding out, and it is no flippancy to say of the god Pan that he soon showed the cloven hoof.¹

Chesterton considered that St. Francis had the right attitude toward nature, that he treated her as a little sister rather than as a mother.² In Orthodoxy, Chesterton had said: "Stars and mountains must not be taken seriously."³ When Chesterton turns to a discussion of Meredith, however, he uses him as a kind of focal point for the expression of his own ideas in regard to the proper place of pagan naturalism. In his discussion there is no sweeping condemnation. Chesterton always found much that was admirable in the old pagan view. Hence, he asserts that Meredith expressed the

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 139.

2 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 99.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 140.

pagan sacramentalism, what I referred to in Chapter Two as Chesterton's mystical materialism.

Nothing is so fine in Meredith as the satisfying solidity of everything. The wind in which Clara Middleton walked is a real wind; the reader can feel it in his hair.¹

Chesterton observes that Meredith was almost a real pagan; and with that pagan spirit that he voiced in The Wild Knight, Chesterton never completely lost sympathy. But he feels that "since Christianity broke the heart of the world and mended it one cannot really be a Pagan; one can only be an anti-Christian."²

That paganism which in William Blake Chesterton refers to as the "man in the forest"³ he calls in his essay on Meredith's moral philosophy "the wave of the world." Chesterton's point is that Meredith trusts that wave, that Meredith believes that nature is a totally benevolent force.

A Pagan is a person who can do what hardly any person for the last two thousand years could do: a person who can take Nature naturally. It is due to Meredith to say that no one outside a few of the great Greeks has ever taken Nature so naturally as he did....

Meredith really is a Pantheist. You can express it by saying that God is

1 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, William Blake, p. 107.

the great All: you can express it much more intelligently by saying that Pan is the great god.¹

In the terminology of Orthodoxy, Meredith does not believe that "Pan...showed the cloven hoof."² He looks at nature as a force which "refreshes and recreates."³ Chesterton asserts that Meredith, unlike Hardy, "can take Nature naturally."⁴ "Nature betrays all the heroines of Hardy; Nature enters in to save all the heroines of Meredith."⁵

What Chesterton means by naturalism, then, is the exact opposite of what he means by civilization:

There is something about Meredith making us feel it is not woman he disbelieves in but civilization. It is a dark...feeling that Meredith would...be...sorry if woman were civilized by man....When we have got that we have got the real Pagan--the man that does believe in Pan.⁶

Chesterton cannot share Meredith's view "that this world is sufficiently good at bottom for us to trust ourselves to it."⁷ The Pan in whom Meredith trusts will, according to Chesterton in Orthodoxy, show "the cloven hoof." It is not that

1 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 139

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 139.

3 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

4 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 139.

5 Chesterton, "The Moral Philosophy of Meredith," The Living Age, 262:423-27, August 14, 1909.

6 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 142.

7 Ibid., p. 140.

Chesterton believes, as he asserts that Hardy believes, that nature is evil.¹ Rather it is that he believes that a principle of evil exists. "I am not proud of knowing the Devil. I made his acquaintance by my own fault."² Chesterton feels that what begins as an apparently healthy and natural attitude will, in the end, become something worse than natural, something evil, unless some principle of religious control keeps the natural attitude in check. It is one of Chesterton's purposes in Orthodoxy to indicate that traditional orthodox Christianity provides such a check.³

Pride

Another of the heresies which are the target of Chesterton's criticism is pride. What Chesterton first thought was his great discovery, the need for humility, he found was at the very heart of Christian orthodoxy.⁴ Since he was aware of the dangers of pride, he hunts for manifestations of that vice in the subjects of his criticism. Invariably present in his criticism of this nature is the idea that the subjects have overlooked a psychological discovery. Although Chesterton would be the last one to point to as an apostle of the doctrine of progress, here, at least, it

1 Chesterton, The Victorian Age In Literature, p. 141.

2 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, p. 76.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 140-141.

4 Ibid., pp. 177-178.

would be true to say that he considered those suffering from pride old-fashioned. Pride, he points out, was often a pagan virtue. Christianity came to supplant paganism.

Mr. Lowes Dickinson has pointed out... the absurd shallowness of those who imagine the pagan enjoyed himself only in a materialistic sense. Of course he enjoyed himself not only intellectually even, he enjoyed himself morally, he enjoyed himself spiritually. But it was himself he was enjoying.... Now the psychological discovery is merely this, that whereas it has been supposed that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by extending our ego to infinity, the truth is that the fullest possible enjoyment is to be found by reducing our ego to zero.¹

While Chesterton's admiration for Milton's poetry is boundless,² he feels that Milton as a man is to be admired rather than loved. Pagan pride and coldness, he feels, were marks of Milton's nature.

And I agree that even in Milton there are gleams of Christianity. Nobody quite without them could have written the simple line: "By the dear might of Him that walked the waves." But it is hardly too much to say that it is the one place where that Figure walks in the whole world of Milton. Nobody, I imagine, has ever been able to recognize Christ in the cold conqueror who drives a chariot in the war in Heaven like Apollo warring on the Titans.³

Observation of Chesterton's comparison of Shakespeare and Milton clarifies his position on the latter's alleged

1 Chesterton, "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson," Heretics, pp. 163-164.

2 Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England," Fancies versus Fads, p. 252.

3 Ibid., p. 260.

un-Christian pride. He feels that Milton

was so successful with Satan because he was rather like Satan himself, I mean his own Satan....The kind of strength that supported Milton...was almost wholly intellectual; it was unsmiling and it was empty of affections....We must remember that there was about the high republican type, the type of Milton, something of this austerity which chilled and even alarmed.¹

"Self is the gorgon," wrote Chesterton in Heretics.

"Pride studies it for itself and is turned to stone."² In Shakespeare, Chesterton saw a man whose religion was not his own, who had a careless kind of humility that came down to him as an echo from the Middle Ages. "Whenever Shakespeare speaks of religion...it is of a religion that has made him." He goes on to cite Shakespeare's almost total absence of concern about his literary reputation as a further example of a kind of humility.³ However, when "Milton speaks of religion, it is Milton's religion: the religion that he has made."⁴ "The kind of strength that supported Milton...was...unsmiling."⁵

Chesterton's tone as regards Milton is almost identical with his tone as regards Whistler and George Moore.

1 Chesterton, "Milton and His Age," The Living Age, 264: 556-62, February 26, 1910.

2 Chesterton, "The Moods of Mr. George Moore," Heretics, p. 131.

3 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 130:672, May 4, 1907.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Chesterton, "Milton and His Age," The Living Age, 264: 556-62, February 26, 1910.

The truth is, I believe, that Whistler never laughed at all. There was no laughter in his nature because there was no thoughtlessness and self-abandon, no humility.¹

Pride is a weakness in the character; it dries up laughter, it dries up wonder, it dries up chivalry and energy. The Christian tradition understands this; therefore Mr. Moore does not understand the Christian tradition.²

For Chesterton, insofar as Milton's religion was Milton's, Milton was to that extent damned. He was ready to admit that Milton was an unusual person. He was perfectly willing to use the adjective "Miltonic." But one of his first articles in The Illustrated London News points out that we should "be startled by the sun and not by the eclipse,"³ in short, that we should concentrate on the big thing, not the exceptions to it. It is amazing that there should be such a poet as Milton, but it is much more amazing that there should be a creature like man. He felt that the more people differed in brains or beauty the more did they need to recognize their essential equality.

Chesterton points out that Milton, like Cromwell, was an exception.⁴ And of Cromwell he writes:

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- 1 Chesterton, "On the Wit of Whistler," Heretics, p. 239.
 2 Chesterton, "The Moods of George Moore," Heretics, p. 130.
 3 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 128:490, October 7, 1905.
 4 Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England," Fancies verus Fads, p. 259.

The strength of Cromwell was that he cared for religion. But the strength of religion was that it did not care for Cromwell; did not care for him, that is, any more than for anybody else. He and his footman were equally welcomed to warm places in the hospitality of Hell. It has been said, very truly, that religion is the thing that makes the ordinary man feel extraordinary; it is an equally important truth that religion is the thing that makes the extraordinary man feel ordinary.¹

In short, Chesterton calls "the rebellion of spiritual pride"² which he observes in Milton, in Moore and Whistler, "the most deadly moral danger in [his] experience of mankind."³ He excuses Milton for "helping Charles I to lose his head," but blames him for "never losing his own."⁴ He observes the same absence of the marks of humility, "thoughtlessness and self-abandon,"⁵ in Moore and Whistler. Finally, he calls to the support of his personal insight one of the voices of orthodox Christianity. "The Roman Catholic Church...has done her best work in singling out... the...sinfulness of pride."⁶

Pessimism

Another of the heresies which Chesterton attacks is pessimism. Even before Chesterton had arrived at an orthodox

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, pp. 15-16.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 130:672, May 4, 1907.

3 Chesterton, "On Preaching," Come To Think of It, p. 136.

4 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 130:672, May 4, 1907.

5 Chesterton, "On the Wit of Whistler," Heretics, p. 239.

6 "The Moods of Mr. George Moore," Ibid., p. 130.

Christian position he was attacking the various manifestations of pessimism. At this stage it would be true to say that he was attempting to drive out one mood with the opposite mood. Plain good spirits would be brought to bear against the black mood that affected many of the writers of the fin de siècle, but even then the good spirits were being given support by something that was, if not a philosophy, a groping toward a philosophy. In The Note Book, which he began in 1894 and kept for the next four or five years, appear these lines: "What is the good of life, it is fleeting; what is the good of a cup of coffee, it is fleeting; Ha. Ha. Ha."¹ In short, life may be fleeting, it may appear futile; but it is a gift. What right do we have to question it?

In Orthodoxy Chesterton presents his concept of the Christian view of optimism. It is the mature formulation of the vague thankfulness expressed in The Note Book. Realizing that within Christianity itself there is much room for pessimism and that optimism itself may be mere cheap optimism, Chesterton preferred to define his position as "cosmic loyalty."² Furthermore, he felt that although Christianity was not devoid of pessimism, it was not the ultimate pessimism. Christianity's attitude toward true

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 59.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 21.

pessimism was, he felt, reflected in her attitude toward the suicide, representing pessimism, and the martyr.

The early Christian martyrs talked of death with a horrible happiness. They blasphemed the beautiful duties of the body: they smelt the grave afar off like a field of flowers. All this has seemed to many the very poetry of pessimism. Yet there is the stake at the crossroads to show what Christianity thought of pessimism.¹

Chesterton, writing in 1923, asserts that the aesthetic pessimism of the Nineties "is merely dead; it was not sufficiently immortal to be damned; but then the image of Dorian Gray was really an idol, with something of the endless youth of a god."²

However, an even deeper pessimism has taken hold of the writers of today. Cyril Connolly seems to suggest that such pessimism is a kind of courageous triumph.

The pessimism...the doubt, the stoicism...were somehow bolstered up by Christianity, even in the most unchristian of these writers, and they were so respectable and so successful besides; what could they know of the utter futility and absurdity and misery of life which seemed to us almost an American discovery...Eliot gave a lead in "The Wasteland" but was soon set apart by his conversion; Huxley could not long bear the spectacle.³

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 134.

2 Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England," Fancies versus Fads, p. 254.

3 Cyril Connolly, "On Englishmen who write American," The New York Times Book Review, December 18, 1949.

This later pessimism Chesterton attacks with equal vehemence.¹ The pessimism of the Nineties and of the post-war variety: these represent the temporal limits of that particular heresy with which Chesterton was immediately acquainted. But his treatment of it has larger scope. It is always Christianity in combat with some larger heresy like the religion of Islam that serves for the framework of the discussion.

Chesterton's essay, "Omar and the Sacred Vine," which appeared in Heretics, provides insight into his attitude toward pessimism in literature and also into his general method: digression prompted by an idea stated or implied in the literary work, "an inevitable tendency to make the spiritual landscape too large for the figures."² The movement is from Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam to a concentration on the attitude toward drinking contained in the poem. But this latter is only the focal point for the real burden of the essay: the joy of Christianity, the sadness of the Eastern religions.

Chesterton observes that the Eastern view reflected in the Rubiyat assigns to God omnipotence. No room is

1 Chesterton, "On Books for Pessimists," Avowals and Denials, pp. 165-170.

2 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 13.

left for man, for "the outlines of human personality and human will."¹ Hence, a cosmic or universal pessimism follows. The result is to be observed in the spirit of the Rubiyat or in the writings of Wilde or of Pater. It is pleasure-seeking based on pessimism: carpe diem. Its error is failing to see that the "thing called high spirits is possible only to the spiritual. Ultimately a man cannot rejoice in anything except the nature of things, ultimately a man can enjoy nothing except religion."² Finally, phrased in the most startling fashion: "Man cannot love mortal things. He can only love immortal things for an instant."³

At times the ingenious ways in which Chesterton manages to introduce the subject of fin de siècle decadent pessimism leads one to believe that he is obsessed with the subject. But if it is an obsession, it is one understandable in the light of his Christian orthodoxy. For him these writers were questioning the goodness of good things;

1 Chesterton, "Omar and the Sacred Vine," Heretics, p. 106.

2 Ibid., p. 110. It strikes me that the thought of these sentences is the exact equivalent of the statement he makes many years later in Chaucer: "The meaning of Aquinas is that medievalism was always seeking a center of gravity. The meaning of Chaucer is that, when found, it was always a center of gaiety." (Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 273).

3 Ibid., p. 109.

his instincts, supported by Christian dogma, had taught him that there might be a limit to these good things, that comparisons to what might have been are odious. In Robinson Crusoe he finds his parable.

That there were two sexes and one sun was like the fact that there were two guns and one axe. It was poignantly urgent that none should be lost; but somehow it was rather fun that none could be added. The trees and the planets seemed like things saved from the wreck; and when I saw the Matterhorn I was glad that it had not been overlooked in the confusion.¹

With such an attitude it is understandable why in Charles Dickens he says: "The second period, fin de siècle, was even full (in some sense) of good things. But it was occupied in asking what is the good of good things? Joy itself became joyless, and the fighting of Cobbett was happier than the feasting of Walter Pater."² When Chesterton attempts to convey his idea of the universality of Dickens, he does so by contrasting the primitive fears that Dickens is able to arouse to the more subtle fears voiced by the decadents. "In a word, Dickens does, in the exact sense make the flesh creep; he does not, like the decadents, make the soul crawl."³

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 116.

2 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 12.

3 Ibid., p. 86.

Chesterton once observed that Hardy "became a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot."¹ Hardy, in short, is also to be included among the pessimists whose doctrines Chesterton condemns as "more pessimist than Christianity."²

Chesterton traces the root of Hardy's pessimism not to agnosticism but to a "strange sort of demonic monism" at variance with "the most Christian thing in all Christian theology...the noble conception of Free Will."³ In another essay he refers to Hardy as a "pandiabolist."⁴

Thus it came naturally to Hardy to think, in a truly Calvinistic style, that the deity must have predestined Tess to damnation, instead of damning the people who treated her badly; and it could not be long before such a deity was treated as a devil.⁵

Particularly noticeable in Chesterton's treatment of Hardy is his tendency to condemn the doctrine, but not the man. Chesterton tells of a meeting between him and Hardy in which the latter said:

I know people say I'm a pessimist; but I don't believe I am naturally; I like a lot of things so much; but I could never get over the idea that it would be better

1 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 143.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, "On Thomas Hardy," Generally Speaking, p. 249.

4 Chesterton, "George Meredith," The Uses of Diversity, p. 31.

5 Chesterton, "On Thomas Hardy," Generally Speaking, p. 249.

for us to be without both the pleasures and the pains; and that the best experience would be some sort of sleep.¹

Chesterton observes that he "actually argued [with] the great Victorian" on this point but goes on to say that he did not think, as he might have if he had been "simply a crude young man," that Hardy was either "superficial or silly."

For this was the truth about Hardy; that he had humility....He defied the gods and dared the lightning....but the great Greeks would have seen that there was no thunderbolt for him, because he had not...insolence.²

Shavianism

Chesterton's book, George Bernard Shaw, provides an exception to the general principle that he devotes full-length works only to those writers whose view of the universe is somehow compatible with his own. Usually he deals with heretics in brief essays, but in George Bernard Shaw Chesterton devotes a good proportion of the space to explaining how Shaw has gone wrong. As is customary with Chesterton, references to the particular works of the writer on which the charge of heresy is based are not numerous or exhaustive. Chesterton presents his reaction to a total

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 285-286.

2 Ibid., p. 286.

impression of Shaw: personality, philosophy, and literary production.

In Heretics Chesterton had announced:

I am not concerned with Mr. Bernard Shaw as one of the most brilliant and one of the most honest men alive;¹ I am concerned with him as a Heretic--that is to say, a man whose philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong.²

Although many of Shaw's heresies, pride and determinism, for example, could be dealt with in the paragraphs devoted to such heresies in the preceding pages of this chapter, I think it desirable to show how Chesterton treats Shavianism itself as a heresy in its own right. Such a division brings out more clearly the many-sidedness of Chesterton's attack.

Chesterton writes of Shaw:

He is perhaps a defective character, but he is not a mixed one. All the virtues he has are heroic virtues. Shaw is like the Venus of Milo; all that there is of him is admirable.³

Observation of those characteristics in which he felt Shaw to be defective is one way of arriving at a fairly

1 Chesterton and Shaw were close friends. Maisie Ward writes, "Each of them would have died rather than really hurt the other." (Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 220). Irvine calls Chesterton's book on Shaw a "gallant" one, free from personal malice. (William Irvine, The Universe of G. B. S., p. 2.) In short, the distinction I drew concerning Chesterton's attitude toward Hardy holds true as regards his attitude toward Shaw. The doctrine is condemned, but not the man.

2 Chesterton, "Introductory Remarks," Heretics, p. 22.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 23.

complete picture of the Chestertonian creed. Furthermore, since Chesterton found that the elements in his creed had been well articulated in Christian orthodoxy, it is not surprising that a chapter of Heretics is devoted to an analysis of Shaw's false doctrines.

It is possible that Chesterton, had he known his subject less intimately, might have seized on such obvious heresies as Shaw's denial of the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and the Atonement.¹ Rather, he proceeds by a more subtle method. Shaw himself refers to it as a kind of divination:

Everything about me that Mr. Chesterton had to divine, he has divined miraculously.² But everything he could have ascertained easily by reading my own plain directions, on the bottle, as it were, remains for him a muddled and painful problem.³

Chesterton's first charge is that Shaw lacks humility.⁴

1 Gerald Griffin, "George Bernard Shaw," The Wild Geese, p. 15.

2 This power of divining Kenner calls Chesterton's "unique metaphysical intuition." (Hugh Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. 134). Irvine observes the same power and calls George Bernard Shaw a "triumph of historical intuition." (William Irvine, The Universe of G. B. S., p. 339). Gilson, referring to Chesterton's St. Thomas Aquinas, writes: "He has guessed all that which they [the few readers who have spent twenty or thirty ^{YEARS} in studying St. Thomas] had tried to demonstrate, and he has said all that which they more or less clumsily were attempting to express in academic formulas." (Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 620).

3 George Bernard Shaw, "Chesterton on Shaw," The Nation, 5:787-88, August 28, 1909.

4 Chesterton, "Mr. Bernard Shaw," Heretics, p. 66.

This, it hardly needs pointing out, was an essential part of Chesterton's creed--and of Christianity. What Chesterton is attempting to clarify here is Shaw's attitude toward the average man, Chesterton's beloved populace. Strictly speaking, Christian humility is more concerned with man's humility before God. It is at Shaw's contempt for man, "the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man,"¹ that Chesterton wants to strike.

Mr. Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man....When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing his great Society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul [sic]² nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward--in a word, a man.³

Because he does not understand humility, thinks Chesterton, Shaw will preach the doctrine of the superman.⁴ Concerning Nietzsche's influence on Shaw, Chesterton writes: "This eloquent sophist has an influence upon Shaw and his school which it would require a separate book adequately to study."⁵ Among the influences is "the superstition of what he calls the superman."⁶ Chesterton asserts first of

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 67.

2 This vagueness, not in the statement itself but in the time sequence, recalls Chesterton's remark about that "most galling of all human chains--the watch chain." (Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 130:672, May 4, 1907.)

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 67.

4 Chesterton, "Mr. Bernard Shaw," Heretics, p. 66.

5 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 196.

6 Ibid., p. 199.

all that this doctrine is not Christian.¹ But a reading of his Orthodoxy indicates that the clash between him and Shaw on this doctrine is not limited to its irreconcilability with Christianity.

Chesterton approached Christianity through the fairy tale:

The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales....Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism is abnormally wrong.²

It is Chesterton's opinion that one particular fairy tale, "Jack the Giant Killer," provides the real answer to the doctrine of the superman:

Jack's fairy sword and invisible coat are clumsy expedients for enabling him to fight at all with something that is by nature stronger. They are a rough, savage substitute for psychological descriptions of special valor or unwearied patience.³

Yet Shaw had reversed the situation:

He argued that when the fairy tales gave Jack the Giant Killer a coat of darkness or a magic sword it removed all credit from Jack in the 'common moral' sense; he won, as Caesar won, only because he was superior....That notion about the hero with the magic sword being the superman with a magic superiority is the caprice of a pedant.⁴

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 198.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 87.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 156.

4 Loc. cit.

This idea "that the strength of the strong is admirable, but not the valor of the weak" Chesterton calls an "incredibly caddish doctrine."¹

I have already noted how Chesterton deals with expressions of the determinism of Calvinism and Puritanism to be found in various writers. Another characteristic of Puritanism, and the one which Chesterton finds most pertinent in his discussion of Shaw, is its rejection of symbol to intervene between God and man.

The phrase about no priest coming between man and his Creator is but an impoverished fragment of the full philosophic doctrine; the true Puritan was equally clear that no singer or storyteller or fiddler must translate the voice of God to him into the tongues of terrestrial beauty.²

Chesterton calls Shaw a Puritan in both senses:

His primary and defiant proposition is the Calvinistic proposition: that the elect do not earn virtue but possess it. The goodness of a man does not consist in trying to be good, but in being good. Julius Caesar prevails over other people by possessing more virtus than they; not because he has struggled heroically, but because he is a hero. So far Bernard Shaw is only what I have called him in the beginning; he is simply a seventeenth-century Calvinist. Caesar is not saved by works, or ever by faith; he is saved because he is one of the elect.³

In the same way Chesterton sees Shaw as expressing

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 157.

2 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. 166.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 155.

Puritan suspicion of all symbolism:

However this may be, Bernard Shaw exhibits all that is purest in the Puritan: the desire to see truth face to face even if it slay us, the high impatience with irrelevant sentiment or obstructive symbol.¹

Again the cleavage between their minds is deep. Again the charge is typical of Chesterton. What Chesterton is saying here about Shaw and Puritanism is almost identical with what he says about Islam. It may be said that Chesterton always has one eye fixed on Eastern heresies.

The two things it [Islam] persecuted were the idea of God made flesh and His being afterwards made wood or stone. A study of the questions smouldering in the track of the prairie fire of the Christian conversion favors the suggestion that this fanaticism against art or mythology was at once a development and a reaction from that conversion, a sort of minority report of the Hebraists. In this sense Islam was something like a Christian heresy.²

Chesterton found this very symbolism rejected by Islam, by the Puritans, by Shaw, to be an important distinguishing mark of historical Christianity:

A mystical materialism marked Christianity from its birth; the very soul of it was a body. Among the stoical philosophies and Oriental negations that were its first foes it fought fiercely and particularly for a supernatural freedom to cure concrete maladies by concrete substances. Hence the

1. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, pp. 46-47.

2 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. 62.

scattering of relics was everywhere like the scattering of seed.¹

It is not only Christianity that Chesterton finds particularistic but also most men--again, the populace.² It is Shaw's doctrine of Puritanism and, in addition, the Puritanism that he retained in the more diluted form of prejudice³ that cut him off from the popular, sacramental Christian tradition. Hence Shaw "has been a bad influence in that he has encouraged fastidiousness."⁴ Chesterton sees in him the tendency to be repelled by the concrete, particularly when that concreteness takes the form of vulgarity: "He can endure lawlessness but not levity. He is not repelled by the divorces and the adulteries as he is by the 'splits!'"⁵

In Heretics Chesterton comments briefly on another Shavian heresy: "The golden rule was there was no golden rule."⁶ His answer here is that while such a generalization appears to free men it really restrains them.⁷ In his longer study, George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton clarifies this contention when he sums up his reaction to The Quintessence of Ibsenism. Chesterton asserts that the freedom

1 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. 26.

2 Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, p. 253.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 47.

4 Ibid., p. 226.

5 Ibid., p. 51.

6 Chesterton, "Mr. Bernard Shaw," Heretics, p. 61.

7 Loc. cit.

from "hint or rule of thumb from our fathers"¹ which it advocates, in short, freedom from golden rules, would result in "frozen timidity." "Every man must act as if he were the first man made."²

Among "the thought destroying forces of our time"³ which Chesterton attacks in Orthodoxy is pragmatism. It is in Christianity that he finds an answer to what he asserts is the inadequacy of these theories. What he say about pragmatism appears to be his argument against the Ibsen-Shaw dictum concerning the golden rule. In both instances he finds that some belief in absolutes, in short, in something that transcends the immediate data of experience, is a human need.⁴

In spite of the fact that Chesterton uses the term "heretics" loosely--at one point going so far as to define a heretic as a man "whose view of things has the hardihood to differ from mine"⁵--a large proportion of his literary comment (when that comment is doctrinal) concerns itself with deviations from Christian orthodoxy. Yet it must be admitted that some of his comments exist in a middle ground.

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 111.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 64.

4 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 64.; "Mr. Bernard Shaw," Heretics, p. 61.

5 Chesterton, "Introductory Remarks," Heretics, p. 22.

He says, as it were: Here this writer is limited. But the standards are not enunciated as Christian. Particularly in the case of his comments on Shaw one finds statements of this nature. To say that the standard is Chestertonian Christianity is the nearest one can come to the truth. This is noticeable when he deals with Shaw's rootlessness and with his rationalism.

Chesterton insists on rootlessness as a characteristic which provides a key to Shaw's personality and literary production. To be rooted means, in Chesterton's mind, primarily to be rooted in local and popular traditions. Chesterton opens his case (as it were) by calling attention to Shaw as the Orange Irishman in a land of Catholics rooted in the land.

The average autochthonous Irishman is close to patriotism because he is close to the earth; he is close to domesticity because he is close to the earth; he is close to doctrinal theology and elaborate ritual because he is close to the earth. In short, he is close to the heavens because he is close to the earth. But we must not expect any of these elemental and collective virtues in the man of the garrison [Shaw].¹

Just as in his study of Stevenson Chesterton kept returning to the idea of limits, the firm line, so here in

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 37.

his study of Shaw he returns to the idea of roots. "He is not rooted in the ancient sagacities of infancy."¹ "That lack of roots, this remoteness from ancient instincts and traditions is responsible for a certain bleak and heartless extravagance of statement on certain subjects."² "It is the attitude of an Irishman cut off from the soil of Ireland, retaining the audacity and even cynicism of the national type, but no longer fed from the roots, with its pathos or its experience."³

A great many of Chesterton's charges against Shaw are based on this key idea that Shaw is detached from human traditions, unrooted. Hence we find Chesterton asserting that Shaw does not understand, or understand the place of, vulgar jokes;⁴ birthday celebrations;⁵ beef and beer;⁶ certain pagan pleasures;⁷ fairy tales;⁸ romance;⁹ marriage, patriotism or Christianity.¹⁰ Furthermore, Chesterton asserts that Shaw's lack of an understanding of romance causes him to blunder in Candida. Shaw, thinks Chesterton, ought not to have pictured Eugene as being revolted by

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 37.

2 Ibid., p. 162.

3 Ibid., p. 182.

4 Ibid., p. 226.

5 Ibid., p. 38.

6 Ibid., p. 226.

7 Ibid., p. 222.

8 Ibid., p. 154.

9 Ibid., p. 123.

10 Ibid., p. 176.

Candida's having to perform domestic drudgery. Knowledge of the "psychology of first love" ought to have made Shaw see that the boy would not be revolted, but would rather feel that the "potatoes had become poetical."¹

The second of Shaw's deviations I have called rationalism. Chesterton makes his own position on this matter clear in Orthodoxy. When he tries to convey his idea of "the maniac" he pictures him as a man who has lost everything except his reason. By this he means that the logician has the detached intellect which, by cutting itself off from certain realities, leads to madness. Chesterton chooses "fighting peoples, proud mothers, first love, fear upon the sea"² as realities that might provide a cure for "the maniac." Chesterton is hardly so fantastic as to assert that this applies in toto to Shaw; but echoes of this judgment find their way into his portrait of Shaw.

He finds in Shaw "a queer clearness of the intellect, like the hard clearness of the crystal."³ Again he writes:

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 124. Irvine expresses general agreement with Chesterton's view that Eugene is an unconvincing character. (William Irvine, The Universe of G. B. S., p. 178). Shaw asserts that Chesterton's comment about the "psychology of first love" is not pertinent, because all love affairs are different. (George Bernard Shaw, "Chesterton on Shaw," The Nation, 5:787-88, August 28, 1909.)

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 39.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 25.

It marks, I think, the recent hardening... of Shaw out of a dramatist into a mere philosopher. And whoever hardens into a philosopher may be hardening into a fanatic.¹

In the same vein, Chesterton asserts that Shaw's "startling suggestions arise from carrying one clear principle further than it has yet been carried. His madness is all consistency, not inconsistency."²

In one sense Chesterton admires Shaw's consistency: "Mr. Bernard Shaw is funny and sincere....The average Cabinet Minister is not sincere and not funny."³ In other words, Shaw had principles about which he was sincere. But the danger Chesterton saw in Shaw's hard, logical, rational approach was that it tended to become rigid. The relationship between Chesterton's view of Shaw and his analysis of "the maniac" is unmistakable. (Chesterton undoubtedly relished saying that "Shaw, if he escapes Harwell, will reach the front rank of journalists, demagogues, or public entertainers."⁴ It is not surprising that Shaw took such criticism lightly. In a letter to Chesterton he writes: "A lot of it [George Bernard Shaw] was fearful nonsense)."⁵

Chesterton observed that "the morbid logician seeks to

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 172.

2 Ibid., p. 173.

3 Chesterton, "On Mr. McCabe and a Divine Frivolity," Heretics, p. 221.

4 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 175.

5 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 234.

make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious."1 "The ordinary man has always been sane.... If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them."2

Chesterton admits that Shaw, unlike the ordinary man, is truly consistent. But he felt that this kind of consistency lost sight of the value of paradox. Shaw, he asserts, is never truly paradoxical. In that sense, Shaw is like the "morbid logician." Like the "morbid logician" Shaw will not let anything obstruct the relentless, straight-line progress of his principles.

Shaw's proposition...is a perfect paradox, if a paradox only means something that makes one jump. But it is not a paradox at all in the sense of a contradiction. It is...enormous and outrageous consistency.³

Chesterton admires Shaw's preaching of the doctrine "that liberty and responsibility go together."⁴ He finds an example of Shaw's "outrageous consistency" in the fact that Shaw wants to apply the principle to children. "He said that one should never tell a child anything without letting him hear the opposite opinion."⁵ The paradox for Chesterton,

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 49.

2 Ibid., p. 48.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 175.

4 Ibid., p. 173.

5 Ibid., p. 174.

which Shaw, he asserts, cannot see, is that "this child is much better than I, yet I must teach it....This being has purer passions than I, yet I must control it."¹

One could predict that Chesterton would say something about Shaw comparable to what he said about Cowper. Chesterton believed that it was Cowper's poetry that kept him partially sane. Logic drove him mad. In the same manner he considers Shaw's love for music to be the "imaginative safety valve of the rationalistic Irishman."²

Yet Chesterton shows his awareness that while his theory of "the maniac" might provide some hints about Shaw's nature, it would be madness on his part to think that it explained Shaw. For example, Chesterton portrays what Shaw's reaction might be to the economist who has become lost in theories, hypotheses, words, the twisting and turning of the solitary intellect.

When the orthodox economist begins with his correct and primary formula, "Suppose there is a Man on an Island--" Shaw is apt to interrupt him sharply, saying, "There is a Man in the Street."³

However, this judgment is the exception. Shaw remains, for Chesterton, a rootless rationalist. In one sense to be so constituted might be thought of as a heresy from Chester-

¹ Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 175.

² Ibid., p. 96.

³ Ibid., p. 240.

tonianism, rather than from any Christian doctrine. However, at one point, Chesterton, in a somewhat puzzling judgement, juxtaposes the names of Shaw and Plato.

Bernard Shaw had much affinity with Plato-- in his instinctive elevation of temper, his courageous pursuit of ideas as far as they will go, his civic idealism; and also, it must be confessed, in his dislike of poets, and a touch of delicate inhumanity.¹

In this passage Chesterton is partially expressing an idea that he expressed more fully in The Everlasting Man. The link that he finds between Shaw and Plato is this very rootlessness and rationalism. "Delicate inhumanity" is fastidious, critical, rational detachment from most of the vulgar and rooted traditions of the populace. Divorced from and scornful of popular traditions, the great pagan philosophers, thinks Chesterton, sought truth solely through the intellect. The populace, in the meanwhile, had expressed itself through myths. Christianity came to unite the two tendencies. It satisfied populace and intellectuals.² However, "He [Shaw] does not understand Christianity because he will not understand the paradox of Christianity, that we can only really understand all myths when we know that one of them is true."³ Shaw, like Plato, distrusts popular

1 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 201. "Plato was only a Bernard Shaw who unfortunately made his jokes in Greek." (Chesterton, Eugenics and Other Evils, p. 12).

2 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, passim.

3 Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 176.

traditions; Chesterton flatly asserts that he trusts popular tradition "more than anything else."¹

My point is, then, that Chesterton in the very act of comparing Shaw and Plato is picturing Shaw not merely as a heretic from the Chestertonian view of the universe. Employing the attitude toward popular traditions as a test, he only has to indicate that both Plato and Shaw are detached from ~~them~~ and, furthermore, that there is a significant relationship between Christianity and popular Western traditions. He can, and does, then picture them as fellow intellectuals outside what he considers to be the main stream of the Christian tradition.

¹ Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 171.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAUCER AND THE SPIRIT OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Chesterton's mind was so constituted that he was always seeking to find unity among variety. Another way to describe this characteristic is to say that he was interested in the hierarchical, in the nature of subordination. He wanted to see the whole and the parts; he wanted to see the limits within which the parts retain their identity. One good example of this tendency is his essay "On Gargoyles." There he writes:

And under the new inspiration they planned a gorgeous cathedral in the Gothic manner, with all the animals of the earth crawling over it, and all the possible ugly things making up one common beauty, because they all appealed to the god. The columns of the temple were carved like the necks of giraffes; the dome was like an ugly tortoise; and the highest pinnacle was a monkey standing on his head with his tail pointing at the sun. And yet the whole was beautiful because it was lifted up in one living and religious gesture as a man lifts his hands in prayer.¹

His story in The Poet and The Lunatics called "The Yellow Bird" suggests the same preoccupation. When is a bird free? If the cage of a canary represents a whole, or a framework, a pattern, is it giving the bird liberty to

¹ Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 4-5.

let it out of the cage?

Is it always kind to set a bird at liberty? What exactly is liberty? First and foremost surely it is the power of a thing to be itself. In some ways the yellow bird was free in the cage. It was free to be alone, it was free to sing. In the forest its feathers would be torn to pieces and its voice choked forever. Then I began to think that being oneself, which is liberty, is itself limitation.¹

A figure of speech employed twenty-one years earlier points to the same truth:

Christianity is the only frame which has preserved the pleasures of Paganism. We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff's edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them they were all huddled in terror in the center of the island; and their song had ceased.²

Finally, Chesterton presents another important slant on the same principle:

The fear is that as morals become less urgent, manners will become more so; and men who have forgotten the fear of God will retain the fear of Littimer. We shall merely sink into a much meaner bondage. For when you break the great laws you do not get liberty; you do not even get anarchy. You get the small laws.³

1 Chesterton, "The Yellow Bird," The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 61.

2 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 260.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 150.

Chesterton, then, was always seeking a whole, a framework, or, to use his figures, a cage for the bird, a wall for the children on the cliff. He found it in Christian orthodoxy, a law that was no "small law." In the second chapter of this study I observed how Chesterton lays emphasis on certain personal qualities which appeal to him in literary men. Chapter One makes clear just why it is these particular personal characteristics which he stresses. I also suggested that many of the writers dealt with in Chapter Two are in revolt against the philosophies, the frameworks, offered them by their ages, and that Chesterton praises their rebellious spirits. In short, Chesterton never uncritically supported any established rule merely because it was an established rule. He was always eager to praise the personal revolt against a philosophy; but it was always revolt against a philosophy which he conceived of as narrow and crippling that he praised.

He pictures Dickens as a writer who scorns the narrowness of various philosophies offered him--Utilitarianism, for example, or Manchester Radicalism.¹ Stevenson's return to the nursery is, for Chesterton, part of a revolt against the narrowness of the pessimistic view of life.² Cobbett

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 101.

2 Chesterton, "On R. L. S.," Generally Speaking, pp. 243-244.

is also a rebel.¹ Here, perhaps, more than with the others, it is hardly necessary for Chesterton to call attention to the fact. But it is the kind of fact that he delights in calling attention to, because it was a rebellion that he joined in wholeheartedly. He emphasizes Cobbett's "instinctive intelligence"² just as he points out that one of the enemies of the utilitarian compromise was the "manly emotionalism of Dickens."³ Nor is Browning one who yields himself to a narrow philosophy. Browning goes "by his own likes and dislikes."⁴ He pictures Browning as one who would have answered had someone asked him for his philosophy of the universe: "Crimson toadstools in Hampshire."⁵

Chaucer

What distinguishes Chesterton's conception of Chaucer from his conception of the writers mentioned in the preceding paragraph is the fact that he finds in Chaucer a writer who is not rebelling against the philosophy, the framework of ideas, current in the society in which he happens to have been born. Chesterton compares Chaucer's attitude to Burns' attitude:

Chaucer may be too much at ease in Zion.
But Burns is not at all at ease in his
Zion. The attitude of Burns to the local
and national theology is one of revolt
and nothing else....But for Chaucer his

1 Chesterton, William Cobbett, passim.

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 45.

4 Ibid., p. 163.

5 Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 182.

theology was a thing that broadened his mind. It brought him into contact with great minds like Dante and Aquinas.¹

Yet, at the same time, and this is equally important, Chesterton perceives in Chaucer no diminution of those qualities of the poet that he admires in the writers who are often rebellious. Chaucer represents for him a kind of repose; yet it is not a dull repose. Writing in 1909, he refers to the "Chaucerian jollity"² of Dickens as a mood of Christendom. Again he writes: "It was he [Dickens] who had the things of Chaucer, the love of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads of England."³ In the following passage, Chesterton, twenty-six years later, approaches the problem from the other end--Chaucer. Obviously he means Dickens to be excluded from his indictment of the moderns:

There is a quality in Chaucer, and in the whole civilization which produced Chaucer, which men of rather wearier civilizations must make a certain effort to understand. It is something that moderns have mainly praised in childhood; because moderns have not preserved it in manhood. It is gusto; it is zest; it is a certain appetite for things as they are; for a stone because it is a stone, or a story because it is a story.⁴

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 270.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 135:831, December 11, 1909.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 123.

4 Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 156-157.

Gusto, in other words, is identical with that appetite for things, for external reality, that Chesterton praises as a mark of the poetic mind.

I think any poetic mind that has loved solidity, the thickness of trees, the squareness of stones, the firmness of clay, must have sometimes wished that they were things to eat. If only brown peat tasted as good as it looks; if only white fir wood were digestible!¹

Chesterton observes that Chaucer "came of a line of men that...dealt with the stuff and substance of things....For them was natural magic and the world's desire stored in positive pots."²

Chesterton felt that in addition to this gusto, this delight in the existence of things, Chaucer possessed the true poet's sense of wonder. Wonder meant for Chesterton the capacity to be surprised, to see things freshly.³ In relating his own experience Chesterton often uses the dandelion as a test of the capacity for wonder.⁴ He refers constantly to Chaucer's comparable appreciation of the daisy.⁵

These things belong to the same world of wonder as the primary wonder at the very existence of the world....Creation was the

1. Chesterton, "The Appetite of Earth," Alarms and Discursions, p. 44.

2 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 73.

3 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 49.

4 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 343-7.

5 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 129; p. 225.

greatest of all revolutions. It was for that, as the ancient poet said, that the morning stars sang together; and the most modern poets, like the medieval poets, may descend very far from that height of realization and stray and stumble and seem distraught; but we shall know them for the Sons of God, when they are still shouting for joy.¹

Simplicity and humility, also marks of the poetic mind, Chesterton sees abundantly in Chaucer. I quoted Chesterton's remarks on Meredith to the effect that the "small man tries to be mysterious and becomes lucid in an awful sense--for we can all see through him."² This undesirable mysteriousness is traced by Chesterton in his essay on George Moore to an unnecessary intrusion of the ego. It is a form of pride.

Where another man would say, "It is a fine day." Mr. Moore says: "Seen through my temperament, the day appeared fine." Where another man would say, "Milton has obviously a fine style," Mr. Moore would say, "As a stylist Milton had always impressed me."³

A paradox is involved here. For Chesterton, Moore is ineffectual in spite of his desire to assert himself, his ego. Chaucer, on the other hand, in spite of his eagerness to efface himself, his "graceful tone of gratitude and even humility," was "one of the most original men who ever lived."⁴

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 34.

2 Chesterton, "George Meredith," The Uses of Diversity, p. 47.

3 Chesterton, "The Moods of Mr. George Moore," Heretics, p. 133.

4 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 31.

Chaucer...is not in the least ashamed of depending on 'oldē bookēs,' but exceedingly proud of it, and, above all, exceedingly pleased to testify to his own pleasure.... Yet, as a fact of literary history Chaucer was one of the most original men who ever lived. When we have this actual originality and then added to it this graceful tone of gratitude and even humility, we have the presence of something I shall venture to call great.¹

Chesterton constantly refers to a love of the grotesque as one of the marks of the poetic, imaginative mind. He conceives of the term "grotesque" in a broad sense. Dickens and Browning both had a desire to indulge in the grotesque; and here the term means energy and joy associated with variety in human character. He pictures Dickens as one who took delight in the grotesque variety of human beings.

Although Chesterton observes that "compared with the fun of Dickens there is certainly something altogether shrewd, sensible and solid about the humor of Chaucer," he goes on to say that

[Chaucer] is already on the road to the Dickensian lunatic asylum of laughter; because he is valuing his fools and knaves and almost wishing (as it were) to preserve them in spirits--in high spirits.²

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 31.

2 Ibid., p. 199.

In the following passage Chesterton emphasizes Chaucer's grasp of the comical aspect of the grotesque:

And there runs through the English humor the same notion of amusing monsters to be stared at. And Chaucer is at the spring of this spirit; because to him the Wife of Bath is an amusing monster.¹

When Chesterton desires to find a parallel for Dicken's treatment of the terrible aspect of the grotesque in the character of Mr. Bumble, he turns to Chaucer. "His [Mr. Bumble's] apoplectic visage recalls the 'fire-red cherub-imre's face' which added such horror to the height and stature of Chaucer's Sompnour."²

In short, Chesterton finds in Chaucer the presence of a particular attitude, delight in grotesque variety, which is a mark of the poetic mind.

I pointed out in the opening paragraph of this chapter that Chesterton always seeks unity among variety, but that he will not sacrifice one for the other. Yet his praise of Dickens and Browning in particular (and to a certain extent of Stevenson) seems to contradict this generalization. When he writes of them, Chesterton is attracted by their spontaneous variety, particularly insofar as that variety is an expression of the energy and joy he associates with the

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 201.

2 Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 63.

grotesque.

Yet Chesterton perceives in Dickens no desire comparable to his own desire to find some repose in a unifying framework of Christian thought. Chesterton wants his grotesque gargoyles to be part of a cathedral dedicated to God.¹

However, he writes of Dickens:

The root things he never understood, the Roman legend, the ancient life of the Mediterranean, the world old civilization of the vine and olive, the mystery of the immutable Church.²

Now Chesterton perceives in Chaucer many of the same qualities of the poet which he admires in Dickens and in the other writers who are discussed in Chapter Two. Chesterton feels that, like them, Chaucer has gusto, a delight in the solidity of things which is a veritable affirmation of external reality;³ like them, Chaucer experiences a sense of wonder at the world;⁴ like them, Chaucer has humility and simplicity of soul;⁵ like them, Chaucer has a lively appreciation of the grotesque.⁶

However, in addition, Chesterton perceives in Chaucer a spaciousness, a repose, "largeness and liberty....[t]he mind of Chaucer was capacious."⁷ In short, Chesterton finds in

1 Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 4-5.

2 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 119.

3 Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 156-157.

4 Ibid., p. 34.

5 Ibid., p. 31.

6 Ibid., p. 201.

7 Ibid., p. 23.

Chaucer something absent from the writers whom I discussed in the second chapter, an understanding of the "root things ...the world old civilization of the vine and olive, the mystery of the immutable Church."¹ What Chesterton sees in Chaucer is what Chesterton thinks is essential--subordination to and dedication to a unifying framework of Christian thought:

And though even a man like Chaucer, through the limits of the medieval machinery, received this culture in a rather fragmentary way, he received enough of its fragments to be filled with its fulness. He was full enough of that fulness not to let his own thought be merely fragmentary; in the sense of thinking one fragment of truth as good as the whole.²

Chesterton conceived of Chaucer's spaciousness as having its origin in his Catholic Christianity, "the cosmic philosophy at the back of the mind."³ This is to state the matter bluntly; but it is not an overstatement of Chesterton's position.⁴ Furthermore, some such statement is needed to indicate the direction of Chesterton's argument in his book on Chaucer. Chesterton on Chaucer as a Catholic is using many of the same arguments that appeared in Orthodoxy twenty-four years earlier. The difference, however,

1 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 119.

2 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 268.

3 Ibid., p. 228.

4 Ibid., p. 270.

is that in Chaucer he is dealing not merely with a creed isolated for examination but with a Church existing in history, with a particular personality, and with the literature which he finds as expression of both the creed and the personality.

For a student of literature, Chesterton's Chaucer is more important than his Orthodoxy, yet it is only through a knowledge of Orthodoxy that one sees how Chesterton's ideas on Christian dogma finally found their way into an analysis of a literary figure. One critic writes concerning the recent reprint of Chaucer that Chesterton's "real concern is with the medieval, spiritual satisfaction found in a secure, unquestioned and complex creed."¹ There is a great deal of truth in this statement; but it is an oversimplification. It makes the whole problem sound dull. For Chesterton, orthodoxy had always been alive; and I contend that he kept it alive in Chaucer.

In Orthodoxy Chesterton wrote:

The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom. But in the modern philosophy the case is

¹ Samuel C. Chew, "Secure Creed," The New York Herald Tribune Book Review, November 27, 1949.

opposite; it is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within. And its despair is this, that it does not really believe that there is any meaning in the universe; therefore it cannot hope to find any romance; its romances will have no plots. A man cannot expect any adventures in the land of anarchy. But a man can expect any number of adventures if he goes traveling in the land of authority.¹

In the preceding passage one observes Chesterton's familiar preoccupation with liberty and adventure in relation to the limits erected by Christian orthodoxy. Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, or more specifically the pilgrimage to Canterbury itself, provides Chesterton with the opportunity to elaborate and enrich this idea.

When Chesterton had written:

Paganism was in art a pure beauty; that was the dawn. Christianity was a beauty created by controlling a million monsters of ugliness, and that in my belief was the zenith and the noon. Modern art and science practically mean having the million monsters and being unable to control them; and I will venture to call that the disruption and decay²

he was applying to art in general his concept that Christianity provides a kind of dedication, a framework for the energy and variety manifested in the natural world, here symbolized by monsters of various kinds. His discussion of the significance of The Canterbury Tales proceeds along the

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 292-293.

2 Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, p. 6.

same line. The principle is used to throw light on the nature of a particular literary work of the Middle Ages.

Thus the Canterbury pilgrimage takes on a very symbolic social character and is indeed the progress which emerged out of the medieval into the modern world. All modern critics can take pleasure in the almost modern realism of the portraiture in the variety of the types and the vigor of the quarrels. But the modern problem is more and more the problem of keeping the company together at all; and the company was kept together because it was going to Canterbury.¹

The preceding passage gives evidence of Chesterton's perceiving a kindred spirit in Chaucer. The emphasis is on the manner in which Chaucer combines the "vigor" and "variety" which please the "modern critics" with subordination to a general plan or purpose that does not result in a diminution of the "vigor." This dual interest, in the one and the many, in unity and variety, is at the very root of Chesterton's view of life. The same concentration on unity and variety leads Chesterton to call the Gothic cathedral of the Middle Ages the "zenith:"² the fact that its spires point toward Heaven does not do away with, in fact encourages, the energetic "monkey standing on his head with his tail pointing at the sun."³

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 171.

2 Chesterton, "On Gargoyles," Alarms and Discursions, p. 6.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

The parallel to Chesterton's "monkey" is Chaucer's Miller. A close study of the evolution of Chesterton's thought bears witness to the truth of this apparently fantastic statement. Chesterton observes the brutal energy and vulgarity of the Miller. He notes the gap in sensibility between him and other characters. "He cannot be expected to share all the shades of fine intellectual mysticism that might exist in the mind of the Prioress or the Parson."¹ Yet the Miller is among the group. Chaucer wants him there. Chesterton wants him there. Chesterton does not want to see him banished to Ramsgate, there to devote himself exclusively to "[winning] the Ram."² In short, Chesterton's appreciations of Chaucer's characters are subordinated to his contention that The Canterbury Tales presents a "symbolic social character."³

Chesterton thinks that only a religion which is more than an "intuition," a religion which is a "social institution" can hold together such variety as is present in Chaucer's group.⁴ In other words, Chesterton employs a particular literary work to support a truth which he is desirous of asserting: that the Catholic Church of Chaucer's time

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 169.

2 Ibid., p. 172.

3 Ibid., p. 171.

4 Ibid., p. 170.

was not exclusive.

Chesterton, then, conceives of the pilgrimage to Canterbury and all that it represents as being enough for Chaucer. A limit, "the limit which is Canterbury,"¹ a purpose, a dedication, much like the dedication of the Gothic cathedral, is established.

Chaucer was a great poet; he was a great man; but he was not a great revolutionist, not even in that sense a great reformer: certainly not a great iconoclast or heretic. He was not a man to hurl Bolshevik opinions like bombs into the crowd of conventional people with whom he lived so courteously and contentedly; he did not have them to throw, and he would not have thought them worth throwing; certainly not worth the explosion.²

The spirit of the Middle Ages

As I have pointed out, Chesterton is concerned with Chaucer as a person and a poet, but more noticeable is his tendency as a medievalist to use Chaucer's poetry and other medieval literature to elucidate certain of his theories or contentions about the nature of the Middle Ages. These contentions are usually large in scope. While they focus on the Middle Ages, they may begin in the pre-Christian period and end in modern times. They may not be concerned primarily with literature. But those portions of the argu-

¹ Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 167.

² Ibid., p. 196.

ment which are buttressed by literature are a form of literary criticism.

The first argument concerns itself with discord or lack of harmony among men in modern life. I cited his observation made in the year 1909, that a split exists between the poet and the people. 'The poet does not praise and admire the things that the people praise and admire.'¹ But Chesterton felt that an even deeper split existed between the people and what he calls professors or intellectuals. He handles the idea humorously in an essay called "The Three Kinds of Men,"² but this lack of accord in society he also saw as a serious problem.

In The Everlasting Man Chesterton observes that the pagan mythology which preceded Christianity was a search for the truth. That mythology, he notes, was largely of popular origin; it was the spontaneous expression of a nameless multitude. He also observes that truth was being sought in a different way by philosophers, that there appeared to be no reconciliation between these views. In short, he finds that there was a real divergence between the intellectuals and the people.³

1 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 134:656, May 8, 1909.

2 Chesterton, "The Three Kinds of Men," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 147-153.

3 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, pp. 108-157.

His point about Christianity is that it came to unite the two streams. A similar thought had been suggested in a study of Blake when he observed that Christianity was the union of the "man in the forest" and Roman order.¹ He feels that Christianity satisfied both the intellect of the philosophers and the much vaguer fancies and feelings of the multitude, which had heretofore been satisfied by mythology.

All this mythological business belongs to the poetical part of man. It seems strangely forgotten nowadays that a myth is a work of imagination and therefore a work of art. It needs a poet to make it. It needs a poet to criticize it. There are more poets than non-poets in the world, as is proved by the popular origin of such legends.²

Chesterton in discussing the literature of the Middle Ages uses it as support for his general contention that this period was much more democratic than is generally supposed. This contention occupies a substantial portion of space in his study, A Short History of England. It appears

1 Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 106-107. When Yeats writes:

"In pity for man's darkening thought
He walked that room and issued thence
In Galilean turbulence;
The Babylonian starlight brought
A fabulous formless darkness in;
Odor of blood when Christ was slain
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline,

he suggests a different view, that Christianity ended classical rationalism and discipline.

2 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 103.

in his study of Chaucer.

The men of Shakespeare's time understood far less of the democratic ideal than the men of Chaucer's time....In the time of Chaucer...there was much more...pressure upon the mind of the...status of a peasant...than there was in...the time of Shakespeare....A man in the position of Shakespeare had more subtle...arts but not more...popular sympathies, than...
Langland.¹

In regard to literature Chesterton finds much of that same participation of the whole populace which he had noted in the origins of myths. The literature of the Renaissance provides a contrast:

Shakespeare emerged to make fun of Snout and Snug producing a play, but there was something to be said for the old guild theatre, in which all the Snouts and Snugs could produce plays. Literature grew more finished because language grew more finished; but for good and evil it was narrowed into national languages. There was no longer a really European Esperanto. In a hundred ways human beings had lost the conception of a complete humanity.²

This conception of a complete humanity to which Chesterton finds the literature bearing witness is the general contention. He can also point to the guilds, the common lands,³ even the education of the period. "Thus the revival

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 40.

2 Chesterton, A Short History of England, pp. ix-x.

3 Ibid., passim.

of learning was not an extension of learning; the public schools ceased to be popular schools."¹

What is noticeable is that Chesterton in his criticism of the literature of later periods portrays a falling-away from this medieval idea of a "complete humanity." Puritanism provides one of the examples of the anti-popular drift of England's literature:

The truth is that English literature bears a very continuous and splendid testimony to the fact that England was not merely Puritan. Ben Jonson in "Bartholomew Fair" spoke for most English people, and certainly for most English poets. Anti-Puritanism was the one thing common to Shakespeare and Dryden, to Swift and Johnson, to Cobbett and Dickens. And the historical bias the other way has come, not from Puritan superiority, but simply from Puritan success. It was the political triumph of the party, in the Revolution and the resultant commercial industrialism, that suppressed the testimony of the populace and the poets. English history has moved away from English literature. Our culture, like our agriculture, is at once very native and very neglected.²

Chesterton associates the widespread emergence of blank verse at the time of the Renaissance with the movement away from the medieval sense of a common humanity. His remarks on this subject provide a good example of his ability to isolate one topic and to build upon it and to

1 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. ix.

2 Chesterton, "Wilton and Merry England," Fancies versus Fads, p. 264.

branch out from it in such a way that he has erected something like his total view of the universe. The basic idea is that the late Renaissance was aristocratic, anti-popular:

Milton is the Renaissance frozen into a Puritan form, the beginning of a period which was in a sense classic, but was in a still more definite sense aristocratic. There the Classicist was the artistic aristocrat because the Calvinist was the spiritual aristocrat.¹

Why does Chesterton defend rhyme? He writes:

Rhyme is consonant to the particular kind of song that can be a popular song, whether pathetic or passionate or comic; and Milton is entitled to his true distinction; nobody is likely to sing "Paradise Lost" as if it were a song of that kind.²

In other words: "Rhyme...corresponds to a chorus so familiar and obvious that all men can join in it."³ Chesterton is consistent here because he is saying the same thing that he said when he began his journalistic career by noting that we all overlook the big things because they are too big to be seen.⁴

The fatal metaphor of progress, which means leaving things behind us, has utterly obscured the real idea of growth, which means leaving things inside us. The heart of the tree remains the same, however many wings are added to it; and a man cannot leave his heart behind by running hard with

1 Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme," Fancies versus Fads, p. 12

2 Ibid., p. 19.

3 Ibid., p. 18.

4 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 128:490, October 7, 1905.

his legs. In the core of all culture are the things that may be said, in every sense, to be learned by heart. In the innermost part of all poetry is the nursery rhyme, the nonsense that is too happy even to care about being nonsensical.¹

Again Chesterton is using the medieval period as a kind of norm; here he uses the phrase "core of all culture." The evolution of blank verse provides a medium for more dignified utterance, but insofar as its use means the disparagement of rhyme, progress involves loss. What is lost is the medium for popular participation.

In the same way, Chesterton feels that much modern poetry has lost contact with the populace, that it creates the need for an interpreter, a "middleman." He points out that those who set out to interpret this poetry do not succeed: "He [the middleman] creates a club...of sympathizers...in which the poet is praised for his incapacity to become popular."² As for the poet, he does not achieve "the full literary function of translating living thoughts into literature."³ Finally, "the ideal condition is that the poet should put his meaning more and more into the language of the people, and that the people should enjoy more and more of the meaning of the poet."⁴

1 Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme," Fancies versus Facts, p. 3.

2 Chesterton, "The Middleman in Poetry," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 204.

3 Chesterton, "On Literary Cliques," All I Survey, p. 110.

4 Ibid., p. 111.

When the poet appeals only to small cliques he is no longer Pontifex. "The poet, like the priest, should bear the ancient title of the builder of the bridge."¹ This idea of the poet as Pontifex is a favorite theme of Chesterton's.

I think...that the other name of Poet is Pontifex; or the Builder of the Bridge. And if there is not a real bridge between his brain and ours, it is useless to argue about whether it has broken down at our end or his. He has not got the communication.²

That Chaucer had such a link with the people Chesterton feels is part of his greatness:

There is...one character which Chaucer shares with all the great ancient poets.The greatest poets...have a certain serenity, because they...have...inherited a large philosophy...which they share with...ordinary men....The great poet only professes to express the thought that everybody has always had....The great poet makes men realize how great are the great emotions which they, in a smaller way have already experienced.... The great poet exists to show the small man how great he is.³

Another aspect of Chesterton's thinking on modern dissolution and lack of unity concentrates on nationalism, a loss of accord among nations rather than among men. This unity he finds at its peak in the medieval period. In the

1 Chesterton, "The Middleman in Poetry," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 209.

2 Chesterton, "On Blake and His Critics," Avowals and Denials, pp. 141-142.

3 Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 26-28.

sense that he loved England, Chesterton is a nationalist. All his works point to his affection. But he was aware of the dangers of an uncritical nationalism; in fact, he was among the few who were willing to criticize England's position in the Boer War.¹

Chesterton finds in the Middle Ages a unifying principle, a universe, what the sociologists today call integration. It is because of this fact that while Chesterton does not talk vaguely about a return to the Middle Ages--whatever that may mean--he does use them as a kind of norm or standard.

When this book was written, for instance, all that world which regarded Mr. Bernard Shaw as the supreme modernist regarded me as a sort of moonstruck antiquary for being a medievalist. Yet I only praised the best of medievalism....I...admitted that in its last twilight were many monsters....I have lived to see him, of all men, proving that there was something to be said even for the monsters of medievalism....For he has defended it on the fundamental ground,...the fact that medieval men's vision of Christendom was something much larger than our empires and races and vested interests; and that where our best can only die gloriously for the flag, they could commit even their crimes for the Cross.²

As a result of this preoccupation with a united Christendom, Chesterton in his literary criticism tends to

1 Chesterton, The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton, pp. 107-118.

2 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. xiii.

emphasize England's Latin origins. This problem is dealt with at greatest length in an essay called "English Literature and the Latin Tradition."

Chesterton writes: "Men say the obvious things about him [Chaucer] ; they call him the Father of English Poetry, but only in the sense in which the same title has been given to an obscure Anglo-Saxon like Caedmon."¹

In connection with this statement Maisie Ward observes:

He stood resolutely for the rights of the amateur: yet I think the scholar might well start off with some exasperation on reading that if Chaucer had been called the Father of English Poetry, so had 'an obscure Anglo-Saxon like Caedmon' whose writing was 'not in that sense poetry and not in any sense English.' It is a curious example of one of the faults Chesterton himself most hated--overlooking something because it was too big: something too he had realized in an earlier work--for Caedmon spoke the language of Alfred the Great.²

She adds:

No one would wish that Chesterton should have ignored the immense debt owed by our language to the French tributary that so enriched its main stream, but it seems strange that in his hospitable mind, in which Alfred's England held so large a place, he should not have found room for an appreciation of the Saxon structure of Chaucer and for all that makes him unmistakably one in a line of which Caedmon

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 11

2 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, pp. 616-617.

was the first great poet. In this book, only his debt to France is stressed, because England is to be thought of as part of Europe--and the part she is a part of is apparently France.¹

Here Maisie Ward singles out for comment two tendencies that are noticeable in Chesterton's work: a tendency to see England in relation to Europe; a tendency to minimize the importance of the Anglo-Saxon contribution to English life, to emphasize the importance of the Latin.

However, evidence points to the fact that in minimizing the Anglo-Saxon contribution Chesterton is not championing a weak kind of internationalism that would efface all the differences between England and other nations. Rather he is striking a blow at racism. For Chesterton the word "Anglo-Saxon" has a particular connotation. Maisie Ward seems to overlook this fact. The word and concept he sees as a product of that class of aristocrats and intellectuals who had gradually taken over power in England since the Renaissance.¹

For as I have already insisted, the Latin tradition is not a learned thing belonging to learned men; on the contrary it is the common thing and the popular thing. In England, the classical past has penetrated into every cranny of common life, into the conversational speech and the very texture of the society. Greek and Latin, as an influence, are not the luxury of any olig-

1 Chesterton, A Short History of England, pp. 133-150.

archy. On the contrary, it was the reaction toward barbarism that was the mere affectation of the aristocracy....Few Anglo-Saxons trouble about whether the purest Anglo-Saxon requires them to talk about a waggon or a wain. But they all talk Latin when they want an omnibus.¹

When Chesterton discusses Chaucer as an Englishman he does not minimize the importance of that portion of his mind that was English; but he does say that "nine-tenths of his mind made him a citizen of the old Empire of Christendom."² He notes that the influence of intellectuals in the nineteenth century had produced the thing called Teuton: "And a thing called the Teutonic Race, afterwards called the Nordic Race and in moments of aberration, the Aryan Race, was supposed to include the English as well as the Germans."³ It is because Chesterton finds this racist notion absurd and dangerous that he sets up as a norm the internationalism that is voiced in the literature of the Middle Ages. It is for this reason that he talks of Caedmon as an "obscure Anglo-Saxon;" and in order to avoid Teutonism is willing to run the risk of appearing to submerge England in France. In Maisie Ward's words: "The part she is a part of is apparently France."

1 Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition," The Fortnightly, 144¹: 182-93, August, 1935.

2 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 180.

3 Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition," The Fortnightly, 144¹; 182-93, August, 1935.

Chesterton employs the literature of the Middle Ages as a support for his contention that the medieval period placed a check on the tendency of men and nations toward discordancy. I have treated these two points separately: discord among men, discord among nations. A third point that should be made is that Chesterton uses the literature of the Middle Ages--and the literature of later periods when such literature is pertinent--to support his paradoxical and penetrating contention that the Renaissance was narrower and more concentrated, less spacious, than the medieval period. In his discussion Chesterton, in typical fashion, permits the particular literary figures involved to be dwarfed by the "spiritual landscape."¹

Chesterton is perennially concerned with the nature of heresy. His treatment of the spaciousness of the Middle Ages as distinguished from the concentration and narrowness of the Renaissance² is rooted in his analysis of the nature of heresy. Since the distinction I have called attention to in the preceding sentence is disputable, a cursory summary of his concept of heresy, in which the distinction is rooted, is essential.

¹ Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 13.

² Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 224-232.

I observed in Chapter Three that Chesterton pictures heresy as a setting up of a mood which appears plausible, but which is vanquished by some aspect of Christian thought. But just as often, Chesterton conceives of heresy as exaggeration of a single truth.

If the Franciscan movement had turned into a new religion, it would, after all, have been a narrow religion. Insofar as it did turn here and there into a heresy, it was a narrow heresy. It did what heresy always does; it set the mood against the mind. The mood was indeed originally the good and glorious mood of the great St. Francis, but it was not the whole mind of God or even of man.¹

Chesterton finds this concentration on the part rather than on the whole most clearly evident in Calvinism. It is Calvinism that he attacks with the most relish. The truth at its root he considers to be the power and majesty of God.² But as early as his book on Dickens, he had been attacking its ultimate form as "that unique dispensation which theologians call Calvinism and Christians devil-worship."³

The chapter in Orthodoxy called "The Maniac" expresses the germinal idea on the subject of heresy. There he pictures the maniac as one whose mind moves in a complete but small circle:

1 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 179.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 21.

3 Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 129.

And I have described at length my vision of the maniac for this reason: that just as I am affected by the maniac, so I am affected by most modern thinkers....They all have exactly that combination we have noted: the combination of an expansive and exhaustive reason with a contracted common sense. They are universal only in the sense that they take one thin explanation and carry it very far.¹

Chesterton, in short, calls Calvinism "devil-worship" because it carries "very far" the idea of the might and majesty of God; it carries it so far that God becomes a tyrant.

That concentration and extremism which Chesterton finds to be a mark of all heresy, but which he observes particularly in Calvinism, he also finds in the literature of the Renaissance.

In the chapter in Chaucer called "Chaucer and the Renaissance" Chesterton is presenting his conviction of the sanity of Chaucer and in general of the medieval period. He is faced with the generalization that the Renaissance was a spacious period.² It is his contention it was in many important respects much less spacious than the Middle Ages.

Thus we have the paradox that the spirit of the Renaissance, at the very moment when it seemed to most men to be emerging into the daylight was, in another sense, at that very moment plunging into the dark.³

1 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 38.

2 Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 224-232.

3 Ibid., p. 229.

He states, flatly: "The Elizabethan epoch...was not spacious. If there was one thing it did not possess, it was that particular sort of fresh air that blows over the daisied meadows of Chaucer."¹

The manner in which Chesterton handles this question of spaciousness is indicative of an amazing consistency in his thought. He compares Shakespeare and Dante and finds Dante the more spacious of the two. "Shakespeare is more concentrated on Hamlet, than Dante is upon Hell; for the very reason that Dante's mind is full of a larger plan of which this is merely a part."² In short, what Chesterton finds in the whole literature of the Renaissance and what differentiates it for him from the literature of the Middle Ages, is a certain kind of concentration. The word "concentration" has for Chesterton the particular connotation which I discussed in Chapter One under "detached intellectualism,"³ the kind of concentration from which one can escape by turning to the real things of the earth.⁴

Chesterton's consistency of thought is evidenced by the fact that in this particular literary comparison--Middle Ages versus Renaissance--he employs variations on the idea of escape into a larger world. In short, the basic idea of

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 225.

2 Ibid., p. 228.

3 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 50.

4 Ibid., p. 39.

heresy, concentration on a part rather than on the whole, is at the root of his comparison. He writes:

Let it be agreed on the one hand, that the Renaissance poets had in one sense obtained a wider as well as a wilder range. But though they juggled with worlds, they had less real sense of how to balance a world.¹

If one remembers what madness signifies for Chesterton it becomes significant that he says: "But I do not remember that, in the whole five volumes of Chaucer, there is such a thing as a madman."² As one might predict, he finds something "sinister in the number of mad people there are in Shakespeare."³ Furthermore:

What is felt faintly even in Shakespeare is felt far more intensely in the other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists; they seem to go in for dancing ballets of lunatics and choruses of idiots, until sanity is the exception rather than the rule.⁴

The comparison, cosmic philosophy versus undue concentration, provides further variation. He pictures Ford and Webster as dramatists who give us more of the "storm" than the "sky."⁵ In the same way Chesterton points to the Elizabethan obsession with "conceits," "conspiracies," and "plots,"⁶ as an example of Renaissance extremism.

1 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 224

2 Loc. cit.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Ibid., p. 228.

6 Ibid., pp. 225-226.

The medieval mind did not really believe that the truth was to be found by going to extremes.¹ And the Elizabethan mind had already had a sort of hint that it might be found there; at the extreme edges of existence and precipices of the human imagination. That is why there followed in theology and thought, after the Renaissance, such extremes of speculation as the Calvinist or the Antinomian.²

When Chesterton appreciates the characters in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales he subordinates his appreciation to a desire to see their "symbolic social character."³ In the same manner, when he writes of Renaissance or late Renaissance literary men, he subordinates his appreciation to a desire to show how their work reflects a loss of the medieval spaciousness. I feel that the whole of the following

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- 1 Woodruff finds that Newman in the nineteenth century, Chesterton in the twentieth, raised their voices against what he calls "exorbitance." (Douglas Woodruff, "On Newman, Chesterton and Exorbitance," For Hilaire Belloc, pp. 30-48). In the passage above Chesterton appears to be tracing to the Renaissance the roots of this extremism or "exorbitance" which he combats in modern life. Woodruff asserts that Chesterton's What's Wrong with the World contains his most cogent attack on modern "exorbitance." I feel that one passage in particular ought to be observed. Chesterton notes that extreme concentration ["exorbitance"] on the profit motive leads to the neglect of the little girl in the slums. He asks for a new scale of values in which profit motives, and all other motives, are subordinated to the human reality of the little girl. "She is the human and sacred image." (Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World, p. 357).
- 2 Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 224-225.
- 3 Ibid., p. 171.

passage bears witness to the accuracy of my contention that Chesterton tends to employ in such a manner the literature of the periods mentioned. However, the two phrases "burrowing in a hole" and "standing on a mountain" ought particularly to be observed.

But compare for one moment the moral atmosphere of the allegorist who wrote the Pilgrim's Progress with that of the allegorist who wrote Piers Plowman. They are both symbolical pageants of human life under the light of religion. Nobody will deny that the Puritan masterpiece is a more complete and coherent work of art; for the national language and literature have become more complete and coherent. But if it comes to broadmindedness, to brotherhood, to a survey of the mighty world, of every class, every problem, every political ideal, then Bunyan is burrowing in a hole while Langland is standing on a mountain. It is very right and even very glorious that Bunyan's statue at Bedford should 'stand facing the place where he lay in gaol'; but there stands no statue on the Malvern Heights, where the great tribune of the Middle Ages saw his vision of justice for the whole world; the corporate common people gathered into one gigantic figure, laboring through clouds and confusions: till, in the last phase of mystery, he turns on us the terrible face of Christ.¹

1 Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. x.

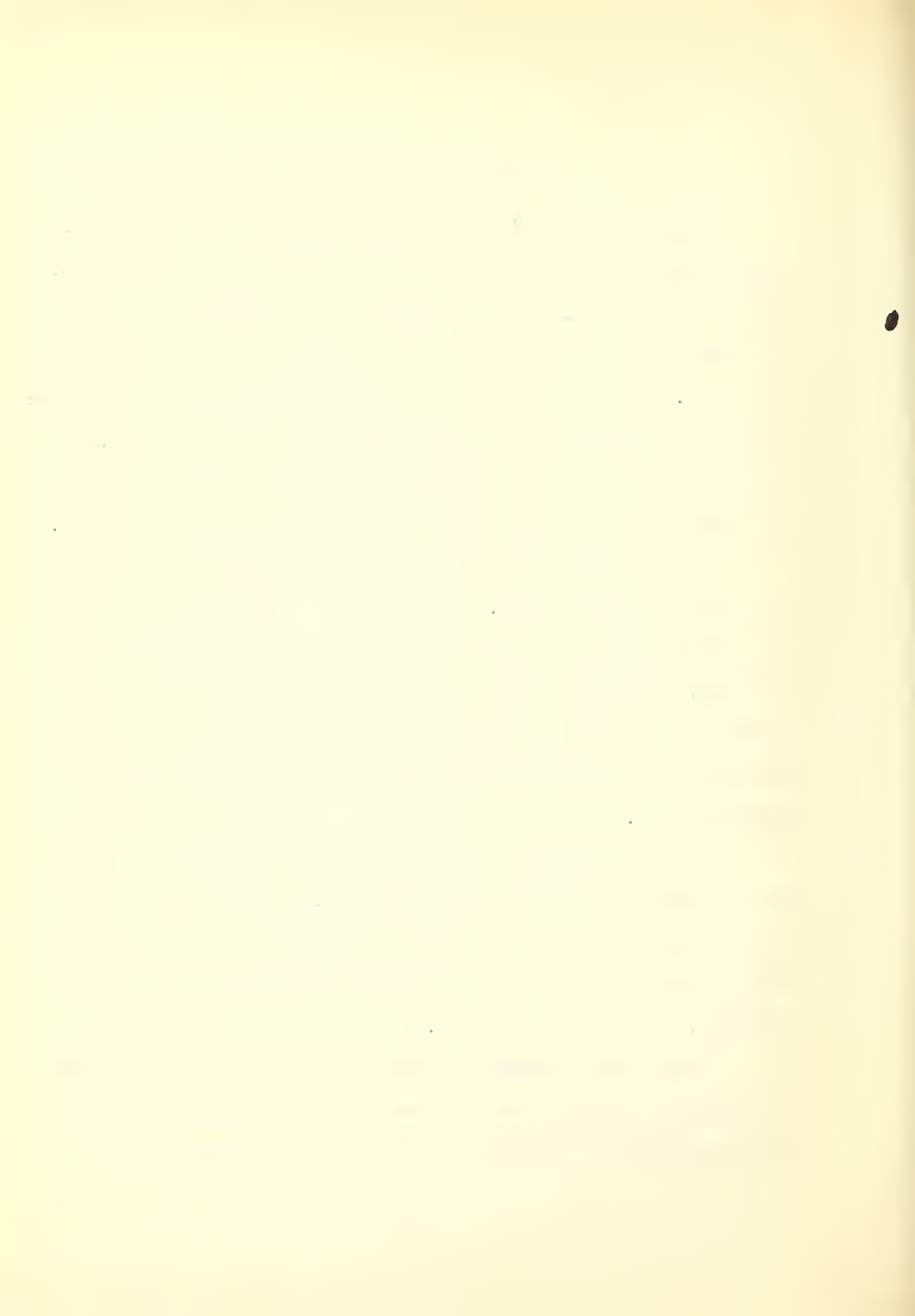
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have indicated that certain key attitudes toward experience constantly reappear in all of Chesterton's writings. I have pointed out the nature of each of these attitudes and have summed up the whole as a "poetic attitude," to distinguish it from a certain rigid and rationalistic approach which he finds narrow and introverted. I have shown how he enters into the spirit of, appreciates, writers who possess some share of his own "poetic attitude."

I have further observed that Chesterton's criticism is not always appreciative. I have noted that the broad basis for his condemnation of the doctrines presented by various writers, as distinct from his appreciation of writers, is their deviation from doctrines which he finds to be at the root of the orthodox Christianity which satisfies his whole nature.

I have indicated that Chesterton's approach to Chaucer as a person and poet is appreciative, in the sense that he perceives in Chaucer a generous share of those attitudes that arouse his enthusiasm for men like Cobbett, Browning, Dickens, Stevenson and Blake.

I have also pointed out that although Chesterton finds in Chaucer something he does not find in the writers I have just mentioned, a repose in the cosmic philosophy of the



medieval Christian Church, he perceives in Chaucer no loss of vigor resulting from orthodoxy. Hence, I have further gone on to show how Chesterton treats the view of life emerging through the medieval literature as a norm, or standard, how he compares the medieval spirit to the spirit of other periods in history.

* * *

Chesterton's chief limitation as a critic is a tendency to dismiss peremptorily the work of a writer who expresses some view of the universe which Chesterton feels is undesirable. I have already discussed the Christian orthodoxy whence emerge the standards which form the basis for his condemnation. Furthermore, it seems to me that it is legitimate for a critic to condemn or praise a philosophy which he finds in a creative work. What I call his chief limitation, then, may be further narrowed down. It is not his concentration on ideas expressed in the work that is the limitation. The limitation arises from the fact that when he feels moved to condemn ideas, he usually does so courageously and cogently; but (and here is the limitation) in making his condemnation he often loses sight of aesthetic value. O. W. Firkins states the matter bluntly; "His sense of beauty, art, technique is insufficient...."

His criticism undervalues art and beauty."¹

In the following passage Chesterton is, as usual, refreshing, funny, and probably right. But one must reluctantly and soberly admit, he is also giving evidence of that insufficiency to which Mr. Firkins calls attention:

Maeterlinck is as efficient in filling a man with strange spiritual tremors as Messrs. Crosse and Blackwell are in filling a man with jam. But it all depends on what you want to be filled with. Lord Rosebery...probably prefers the spiritual tremors. I, being an orthodox Christian, prefer the jam.²

To a greater or less degree this same casualness with which he brushes aside the "art and beauty" to be found in Maeterlinck may be discerned in his treatment of all the writers whom I discuss in the chapter called "Heretics." Intensity of conviction about ideas is combined with casualness about aesthetic value.

Chesterton's reaction to T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is of the same nature as is his reaction to Maeterlinck's writings. His tendency to overlook artistic value is perhaps even more noticeable in his reaction to this work. Chesterton, a tooth-and-nail fighter against pessimism and despair, naturally feels that to picture the

1 O. W. Firkins, "G. K. Chesterton," The Forum, 48:597-607, November, 1912.

2 Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World, p. 13.

world as ending with a "whimper" is obnoxious.

And they may end with a whimper,
But we will end with a bang.¹

In addition to overlooking Eliot's talent as a poet, Chesterton also seems to forget the possibility that a creative artist, in achieving some philosophy which is more than mere despair, might have to pass through painful and laborious experiences and experiments that might involve him in "spiritual tremors" of the kind which Chesterton so cavalierly dismisses. Generally speaking, this hesitant modern world is so justifiably filled with "spiritual tremors" that its hesitation at the jolliness of swallowing Chesterton's "jam" is understandable. One critic is enraged by what she considers to be Chesterton's optimism:²

You must drink beer, be an optimist,
dislike vegetarians and Turks and
anti-vivisectionists and atheists,
regret the good old Dark Ages...
join the Roman Catholic Church, and
celebrate your birthday.³

T. S. Eliot writes: "I find Mr. Chesterton's...cheerfulness...depressing."⁴

Chesterton's contributions to literary criticism are wide in scope. First, he was a popularizer in the best

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 644.

2 Strictly speaking, Chesterton was not an optimist. See pp. 98, 106.

3 Dorothy Edwards, "G. K. Chesterton," Scrutinies, p. 33.

4 T. S. Eliot, "Mr. Chesterton (and Stevenson)," The Nation and Atheneum, 42:516, December 31, 1927.

sense of that term. He was not a vulgarizer. In the words of Maurice Evans, "He wrote for the crowd instead of the clique."¹ Chesterton himself asserted that he considered it his duty to attack the "nonsense of minorities" in behalf of a "public opinion [not] in power."² In this matter Chesterton found himself in the familiar position of combatting a tendency of his age. Whenever he found wilful obscurity or confusion masquerading as artistry, as he often did, he would voice his conviction that the poet should not write merely for men of his own taste. He should "put his meaning more and more into the language of the people."³

A second important contribution of Chesterton to literary criticism is his prominent role in attacking the sterility of the "art for art's sake" doctrine as it was manifested in literature. I have already discussed at length his condemnation of the fin de siècle atmosphere. In one sense his attack on this atmosphere might be thought of as limited in importance because the movement itself was of short duration. However, distaste for the decadent atmosphere bred in Chesterton a vigorous approach to literature which is of permanent value. In the words of

1 Maurice Evans, C. K. Chesterton, p. 156.

2 Chesterton, "Our Note Book," The Illustrated London News, 142:332, March 15, 1913.

3 Chesterton, "On Literary Cliques," All I Survey, p. 111.

Stuart Sherman: "Far from taking literature lightly, he brings his whole character and his conviction to bear upon it."¹

What bringing "his whole character and his conviction to bear upon it" means, more specifically, is that Chesterton brings religion, philosophy, sociology,² politics, and economics into his discussions of literature. Bogaerts calls this tendency a defect.³ But concentration on the philosophy (or any one of the aforementioned human concerns) expressed in a work is not in itself a defect. It is inevitable that a critic like Chesterton, who found that all "able modern writers"⁴ had a constructive and affirmative view which they asked to be taken seriously, would focus his attention on that point of view. Such a concentration on doctrine, I feel, brought the same breath of reality into literary criticism that Shaw brought into creative literature.

Another of Chesterton's important contributions to literary criticism is that he attempted to find some solution to the problem of the isolation of the man of letters in the modern period. In one of his radio talks dealing

1 Stuart Sherman, "Gilbert Keith Chesterton," The Emotional Discovery of America, p. 176.

2 I hesitate to use this word as one descriptive of Chesterton's interests. Chesterton did not care for its pseudo-scientific connotation. See Chapter Three, p. 91. However, Chesterton shared many of the broad interests that are now referred to as "sociology."

3 Anthony Bogaerts, Chesterton and the Victorian Age, p. 161.

4 Chesterton, "Concluding Remarks," Heretics, p. 287.

with the literature of various periods, he observes:

I have collected a number of most interesting twentieth century books claiming to declare a twentieth century philosophy; they really have a common quality.... Suppose I said that the main mark of the twentieth century, in ethics as in economics, is bankruptcy.¹

Again he observes that in modern literature we witness the phenomenon of isolation. What is isolated is "not only the mind but the mood."² I have already discussed in Chapter Three how Chesterton defines heresies as particular moods isolated. In Chapter Four I pointed out how he looks to the best of the Middle Ages as representing a kind of sane repose in the cosmic philosophy of the church of that period.

What I have not mentioned is why this stand that he takes is to be considered a contribution to literary criticism. First, Chesterton shares with others his conviction that modern life, and particularly modern life as reflected through literature, exhibits bankruptcy. He shares with the humanists, Babbitt and Foerster, conviction as to the necessity of recreating some framework of general principles. Like them, Chesterton feels that we need to rediscover "free will and responsibility and auth-

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 639.

2 Chesterton, "The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 188.

ority and self-denial."¹ But Chesterton's contribution resides in his attempt to find principles more inclusive than the humanistic principles. He saw that the humanistic principles could not have a wide enough appeal. "I feel a faint interest in how many people out of the battered and bewildered human race are actually expected to understand it [humanism] ."² Hence he championed orthodox Christianity.

Chesterton saw that the modern Western world had lost its "communal and positive"³ ideals, and that this loss was reflected in its literature. But he not only observed that the standards which were once the standards of Christendom were evaporating; he attempted to recreate an atmosphere in which writers could work, in which they could find understanding and response in their fellow men, not puzzled rejection. He criticizes a modern writer like Huxley for his dismally pessimistic portrait of a dismal world. It is a criticism of both the writer and the society which the writer interprets. But Chesterton did more than criticize; he attempted to build a new world.

Because his eyes were fixed on this broad objective,

1 Chesterton, "On the Creative and the Critical," All I Survey, p. 88.

2 Chesterton, The Thing, p. 24.

3 Chesterton, "The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 188.

his literary criticism often appears to stray from the subject. Much that appears in his Chaucer is an expression of the same desire--to create a Christian synthesis--which prompts him in his attacks on capitalism. G. K.'s Weekly, his newspaper which attacked capitalism and attempted to foster interest in distributism, took a large portion of his energy and intellectual power--and money.¹ In short, since Chesterton never isolated literary criticism, it is impossible without creating distortion to comment on his literary criticism as if it were isolated. Chesterton's attempt to create a new atmosphere in which writers could create is the positive side of that critical activity which leads him to condemn their doctrines.

That portion of Chesterton's criticism which I deal with in Chapter Two and call appreciative criticism, must be read with caution. It should undoubtedly be read principally in connection with other critical works which limit themselves more faithfully to the facts about the author under discussion. This generalization is probably applicable to all appreciative works but it is particularly applicable to Chesterton's. James Routh observes, in discussing Chesterton's treatment of Browning, that "we see Browning sometimes, but Mr. Chesterton always."² In short,

1 Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, pp. 595-668.

2 James Routh, The Critic, 43:182, August, 1903.

the reading of other critical works, in addition to the original texts themselves, should help to disentangle the strands when they become twisted. To say this is not to deny that Chesterton is often brilliant in his insights. But the very brilliance of his observations necessitates a checking of factual basis--the subject's personality or literary work--which prompts the astute observation.

However, the surprising fact is not that the pertinency of Chesterton's appreciative criticism may sometimes be questioned. The surprising fact is not that we can question whether Stevenson, in revolting from pessimism, went through the exact mental process which Chesterton attributes to him. (Incidentally, since Chesterton gives us a "conjectural description" of what went on inside of Stevenson's mind, there is little on which to base affirmation or denial of accuracy). The surprising fact is that Chesterton combined the desire and the ability to enter into the spirit of a variety of writers when he was, primarily, a judicial and dogmatic critic who focused his attention on ideas. The combination of appreciative power and critical acumen in dealing with ideas is certainly not unique. But the degree to which Chesterton possessed both characteristics is unusual.

A tendency now exists, in some quarters, to dismiss Chesterton as a mere stylist who writes eloquently or

cleverly about little or nothing. According to these critics, his work is "glittering [with] paradoxes"¹ on the surface but is rooted in a view of life characterized by "sterility [and] banality."² However, one critic finds both the style of Chaucer and the doctrine which permeates it tiresome.³ These strike me as superficial views. Christian orthodoxy is not banal, nor is Chesterton's highly personal interpretation of it. Furthermore, the charge that Chesterton is chiefly interested in a meretricious kind of style, in a glittering manner of expression, is basically inaccurate. It is true that, in the words of Belloc, verbalism was his "superficial defect." But, continues Belloc, in his habitual harsh and scathing⁴ manner:

Fools were led thereby to think that he was merely verbalist, whereas he was in reality a thinker so profound and so direct that he had no equal.⁵

In short, the paradox that at its worst became a mannerism was at its best the natural expression of Chesterton's

1 Manly, Rickert, Millet, Contemporary British Literature, p. 109.

2 Ibid., p. 10.

3 Samuel C. Chew, "Secure Creed," The New York Herald Tribune Book Review, November 27, 1949.

4 Belloc's tone is often harsh and biting. He feels that Chesterton's "charity," although it is a "personal advantage" will "drag upon his chances of endurance upon paper. ...He wounded none, but thus also he failed to provide weapons wherewith one may wound and kill folly." (Hilaire Belloc, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters, p. 81.

5 Ibid., p. 72.

way of thinking, a way of thinking that has been analyzed by Kenner in his Paradox in Chesterton.

A sounder interpretation than that which dismisses Chesterton as banal is offered in the following general judgment. The spirit which it tries to capture is the spirit which characterizes Chesterton's literary criticism:

Before his vitality the adjectives themselves are second rate....This champion of the orthodox looms like a red-cloaked crusader against the gray background of latter-day rationalists. Proudly he carried the banner of the ancient truths while he tilted against the defenses of the modern ones.¹

1 Blodgett and Johnson, Readings for Our Times, Vol. I, p. 121.

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ABSTRACT

Understandably, only a small proportion of the voluminous commentary on Chesterton's voluminous writing is concerned with his literary criticism. Chesterton was not primarily a literary critic. It is impossible to name, conclusively, at this date that activity for which he will primarily be remembered. His dominant interests lay in religion, philosophy, economics, politics. He expressed his ideas through the medium of essays, poems, plays, novels and histories. His energy was gigantic, his diverse production a gigantic rebellion against most of the tendencies of the first thirty-six years of the twentieth century that were the span of his activity. The tendency of those books which do comment on Chesterton's literary criticism is to emphasize its doctrinal nature. Such an emphasis may be observed in Maurice Evans, G. K. Chesterton (1939), Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton, A Criticism (1909), and Gerald Bullett, The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton (1921). Sister Mary Paul Fisch in her Master's Thesis, G. K. Chesterton as Literary Critic (1944) and Anthony Bogaerts, Chesterton and the Victorian Age (1940) have both written highly readable works. However, I feel that their chief limitation resides in a slighting of those principles which are at the root of Chesterton's judgments or appreciations of literature.

In the first chapter I define Chesterton's philosophy. I show that this philosophy may, in the final analysis, be identified with Christian orthodoxy. However, I also indicate that at the basis of this orthodoxy is a highly poetic, personal and unorthodox approach to experience. The elements of this unorthodox philosophy are an affirmation of external reality, a sense of wonder, simplicity of soul, appreciation of the grotesque, mystical materialism, love for the populace and a sense of limits.

In the second chapter I show the manner in which Chesterton's philosophy appears in his literary criticism. The literary criticism dealt with in this chapter is of an appreciative nature. As appreciative critic Chesterton attempts to illuminate his subject's nature by focusing the reader's attention on one or several of those elements of the Chestertonian philosophy which I listed in the preceding paragraph. In the writer who is the subject of his criticism, Chesterton finds reflected some aspect of his own view of experience. Chesterton concentrates on Cobbett's blunt affirmation of plain realities and short words in a world which was facing domination by financial abstractions. He emphasizes Dickens' fierce revolt against the coldness and lifelessness of Manchester Radicalism and Utilitarianism.

Dickens, he asserts, understood the revolt of the weak against the strong, but was never misled by abstract and involved interpretations of the social struggle. Chesterton's emphasis on the wonder which should be aroused even by the commonplace prompts an interpretation of the reason for Browning's employment of commonplace imagery. Similarly Chesterton finds in Stevenson's light touching on romantic love an attempt to escape to a childhood land of wonder. Chesterton asserts that a certain simplicity of soul, which he finds absent from the writers of the fin de siècle, is desirable in a creative writer. He finds such simplicity both in Dickens and in Dickens' characters. Pickwick and Toots, according to Chesterton, have adventures because they are innocent. He discerns a comparable simplicity in Meredith, in Shakespeare and in Browning. Chesterton finds in his concept of mystical materialism a basis for interpretation of Meredith and Blake. He discerns a hearty love for the populace, not unlike his own democratic ardor, in the works of Dickens and Browning. Chesterton's insistence on the importance of limits appears in his interpretation of Blake and Stevenson. Blake appears as the champion of the firm line, a rebel against Impressionism before its existence as a formal movement. He emphasizes the thinness,

clarity and sharpness of outline in Stevenson's style.

In the third chapter I show the relationship between Chesterton's Christian orthodoxy and his literary criticism. I observe that Chesterton's attitude toward the writers dealt with in this chapter is not appreciative, but judicial and negative, and that he concentrates not on the literary work in its totality, but on the doctrine implicit in it. I observe that when he condemns a doctrine, the basis or standard for his condemnation is usually Christian orthodoxy, although at times he is less precise in his formulation of the standard. However, even that criticism which stems less unmistakably from Christian orthodoxy--notably his treatment of Shaw--is strongly colored by the Christian atmosphere. Chesterton condemns determinism, finding it expressed in varying degrees in Zola, Shelley, Ibsen and Huxley. Because Chesterton finds that Shakespeare has endowed Macbeth with Christian freedom of the will, he is led to assert that Macbeth is the "greatest drama in the world." Chesterton condemns naturalism, which he finds present in Meredith's interpretation of nature as a pervasively benevolent force. He finds in Christianity an answer both to Meredith's optimism and to Hardy's pandiabolism. Chesterton's upholding of the ancient Christian

truth of humility leads him to condemn the pagan pride which he finds in Milton and in George Moore. Asserting that Christianity is never pessimistic, Chesterton condemns the pessimism which he finds to be a dominant mood of Hardy and the writers of the fin de siècle. Finally, he condemns a complex of ideas and prejudices which he discovers at the root of Shaw's view of life.

In the fourth chapter I explain the nature of Chesterton's view of Chaucer and the Middle Ages. Most of the writers who arouse Chesterton's admiration are rebels against some narrow dogma or dominant tendency of their age: Stevenson rejects pessimism; Dickens rejects Utilitarianism; Cobbett rejects industrialism and an emerging world of complex finance. Chaucer is a notable exception. Chesterton pictures Chaucer as a writer whose dominant characteristic is sanity and repose achieved by willing acceptance of the framework of ideas offered by the Christian Church of his period. In addition, Chesterton emphasizes the contention that Chaucer, although not rebellious against the dominant ideas of the period, gives evidence of possessing most of those qualities which Chesterton finds admirable in a poet. Chaucer delights in the sheer existence of things: he presents a veritable affirmation of external reality; he

experiences a sense of wonder at the fact of their existence; he possesses a certain simplicity of soul; he has a lively appreciation of the grotesque and the vulgar.

Chesterton employs Chaucer's poetry, and other literature of the Middle Ages, to buttress his contentions about the general nature of that period. He compares the medieval conception of a common humanity to modern discord among classes, particularly intellectuals and populace. He compares medieval rhyme to Renaissance blank verse and finds the latter to be indicative of the beginning of a split between poets and people which is still present. His desire to champion the old Empire of Christendom against the nationalism of the Renaissance and of the twentieth century leads him to emphasize the Latin, rather than the Anglo-Saxon, origins of England's language and literature. Finally, he notes that a loss of medieval spaciousness is apparent in Renaissance literature.

Chesterton's chief limitation as a critic was a tendency toward peremptory dismissal of writers whose doctrines did not agree with his. His desire to condemn erroneous philosophies often blinded him to aesthetic value. Also noticeable was a confusing mingling of his own experience with the experience of the writer whom he was discussing,

a tendency which led at its worst to inaccuracy.

This tendency to permit a mingling of his own experience and the experience of his subject often led him, however, to brilliant illumination of his subject's nature. Furthermore, I believe that Chesterton's attempt to establish some rapport between the creative writer and the general public should be considered a contribution to literary criticism. His customary course was to champion the attitude of the people, to caution poets whom he suspected of making a virtue of obscurity that the poet should be "Pontifex." Convinced that there could be no bridge between minds if there were no common philosophy, Chesterton attempted through his championing, first, of Christian orthodoxy and, ultimately, of Roman Catholicism, to discover some solution to the problem of the modern writer's isolation. Through his vigorous but not bitter insistence on the importance of doctrine--whether religious, philosophical or economic--in literature, Chesterton brought breadth and challenge into literary criticism.



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